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**THREE YEARS IN THE LEVANT**



# THREE YEARS IN THE LEVANT

BY

RICHARD PEARSE

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*C*O MY FORMER COLLEAGUES, WHOSE LONELY, ceaseless vigil along the northern frontiers of the Middle East contributed in some small measure to the stability of the Levant during the war years.

To those named in the text, to the F.S.O.s at Aleppo and Beirut, and to Barney, Elton, Ali, Murray, Jimmy, Rudi and Craig I am particularly grateful. Amongst the old stagers who did all the spadework their knowledge and sound advice made the going smooth and easy for one who had merely to step into their shoes, or work with them.

This small selection of experiences, pruned and carefully arranged for security and other considerations, may not be their interpretation of the Levant, but it is compiled from the raw material they know so well.

## CONTENTS

### PART ONE

#### CHAPTER

- I. MOSLEM MÉNAGE, *page* 1
- II. THE SURFACE OF LOCAL LIFE, *page* 9
- III. BENEATH THE SURFACE, *page* 18
- IV. FANATICAL ISLAM, *page* 30
- V. SURIYA REPUBLICA, *page* 39
- VI. NEJIB THE FEUDALIST, *page* 44
- VII. CIRCUMCISION FEAST, *page* 50
- VIII. PROPAGANDA PROBLEM, *page* 54
- IX. THE DYING RACE, *page* 59
- X. THE CIVILISED BEDOUIN, *page* 64
- XI. ENTENTE CORDIALE, *page* 72
- XII. ARAB METROPOLIS, *page* 77

### PART TWO

- XIII. A GREY HUT IN THE STEPPE, *page* 85
- XIV. ARAB SPRING, *page* 92
- XV. THE GERMAN DREAM, *page* 101
- XVI. DESERT TRAIN, *page* 109
- XVII. MASTER RACE — AND PAWNS, *page* 114
- XVIII. TURKISH FRONTIER POSTS, *page* 121
- XIX. LIFE IN THE STEPPE, *page* 127
- XX. WHEN ARAB BLOOD IS ROUSED, *page* 134
- XXI. FRENCH ARMY CAMP, *page* 139

### PART THREE

- XXII. THE BRIDGE OF FLOWERS, *page* 145
- XXIII. LOST WORLD, *page* 149
- XXIV. ALIEN CREED, *page* 156

## PART FOUR

## CHAPTER

XXV. THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SUN, *page* 159  
 XXVI. RED LEVANT, *page* 164  
 XXVII. GREEN LEVANT, *page* 173

## PART FIVE

XXVIII. BIBLE COUNTRY, *page* 179  
 XXIX. ERETZ ISRAEL, *page* 184  
 XXX. FRENCH BLUNDERING, *page* 196  
 XXXI. A MAN OF THE LEBANON, *page* 204  
 XXXII. ZIONIST FASCISM, *page* 210  
 XXXIII. ARAB TREACHERY, *page* 219  
 XXXIV. SEMITIC CONTRASTS, *page* 223  
 XXXV. MERJAYOUN MAÑANA, *page* 229  
 XXXVI. THE METWALIS, *page* 234

## PART SIX

XXXVII. MAID OF THE MOUNTAINS, *page* 239

## PART SEVEN

XXXVIII. NEW PHOENICIA, *page* 249  
 XXXIX. TYRIAN TRIVIALITIES, *page* 254  
 XL. THE ARMENIANS GO TO RUSSIA, *page* 263  
 XLI. THE VOICE OF ISLAM, *page* 271  
 XLII. CO-OPERATION OR ANTAGONISM ?, *page* 284  
 XLIII. RED LIGHT, *page* 291

## Part One



### CHAPTER I

#### MOSLEM MÉNAGE

IT was summer on the high steppe plateau of north-west Syria, east of the broad range of mountains that separate it from the Mediterranean. The whole countryside, dancing in a heat haze, was scorched brown and swept by a hot dust-laden gale. Our road westwards from Aleppo led us through shapeless hills, thirsty and fiery under the blazing sun. There was no sign of human or animal life. From the hills the road ran down through a vast plain of yellow corn stubble and parched red earth, smudged here and there with dark-green vineyards and olive groves. Far ahead we could see our objective, the little country town of Idlib, a compact and white agglomeration numbering some 25,000 souls. The town was completely encircled by a wide belt of olive groves.

“Let others do all the talking,” said Louis, who had gone to Aleppo to fetch me and my kit. “We just sit back and listen. You may find them boring, but you never know when they might come out with something of interest to us. Remember, they don’t know why we are here. It pays to listen intently, for their talk is always in parables, and it requires some sifting. You will soon pick up plenty of colloquial Arabic, but meanwhile French is sufficient.” It does not befall many soldiers to be shipped from England to work in the Moslem countryside, and this without undergoing a period of readjustment. It had been made clear to me that my work would create itself, and that I would have no trouble if I used imagination, tact, diplomacy, mature judgment and infinite patience. Though I had undergone

specialised training in England, I felt that the army was asking much if it expected a soldier to be possessed of such an array of qualities. It had been hinted to me that my job fell into the "soft" category, which presumably included cooks, G.H.Q. clerks, batmen and hospital orderlies.

We pulled up outside a large stone building, and at once a host of idle men and youths appeared and stared without embarrassment. Louis detailed three of them to carry the provisions, kit and bundles of propaganda magazines upstairs. The remainder dispersed under the harmless brandishments of a big stick, which Louis always carried in the Bedford. "These idlers," he said, "do not understand hints. I resent their making me the object of their curiosity, but I never hit them. We won't have to unless we get stoned. Local people get cocky when the Germans win a battle anywhere. They once pelted one of our blokes with stones."

"Home" was a room upstairs in the stone building. The ground floor was a corn store, and outside the door several labourers were unloading sacks of grain from the backs of kneeling camels. The youths who had carried the kit upstairs received as reward a propaganda magazine each. "They can't read," said Louis, "but they sell the papers in the soukhs at 2s. 6d. a lb. Unread British propaganda is in great demand as wrapping paper. Tens of thousands of mags. are distributed all over the Middle East every month to an illiterate population. If the people in Cairo feel that the mags. help out the wrapping-paper shortage they shouldn't bother to print them. In '40 and '41 the Germans were more clever. They gave radio receiving sets to notables and café owners. That's the only way to lie effectively to an illiterate population." He added that I would soon discover Hitler's religion, all Idlib claiming him to be a Moslem, and referring to him affectionately as Abu Ali.

The room was not large. It contained two French army iron beds, a table, two chairs and a huge article of furniture

that served as wardrobe. In the room we had to eat, relax, sleep and receive visitors, so by no stretch of the imagination could it be called spacious. The only other European in the town was a French army officer. He had a fine house with a large courtyard, a garden, a staff car, chauffeur, and one or two servants in addition to his personal *ordonnance*. I soon discovered it went down badly with the Moslems that we two, firstly as Europeans, and secondly as representatives of the British army and government in a very wide area, should have to live in one small room. A more spacious billet, available if required, was inconveniently situated in a crowded part of the old town. Failing an isolated house, far from the prying eyes of local mischief-makers, we preferred our room on the main road on the outskirts of the town.

The black clusters of flies that had been feeding on the open sores of the camels downstairs came in in hundreds. The door had to remain open while Louis made good use of the idlers who stood outside. He made them fetch water, sweep the room out, rearrange the kit and buy grapes and local cigarettes. Next door, the wheat-control office received a stream of peasants and farmers, most of whom thought our room was part of it. They would walk in and stare silently at us until they were pushed out again. "Why not put a notice on the door marked, 'Private. Keep out'?" Louis' simple answer was, "None of them can read."

"Who does the cooking?" I ventured, eyeing some utensils on the floor in a corner. Louis stopped unpacking and looked up, surprised. Where did I think I was? On holiday, at home or in a sergeants' mess? "In this job," he explained, "you have to be mechanic, cook, doctor, politician, diplomat, prize-fighter and scullery hand. Sarkis, my Armenian help, sometimes tries to cook, but we'll be doing most of it ourselves. But often as not we eat out, in the town, in the villages, in Bedouin camps, or anywhere we happen to be. Food and drink are as incidental as shirts and petrol. They are necessary, but of little importance."

I turned to find a pretty smiling girl, dressed in a flowery summer frock, standing at the door. She was introduced to me as Nadia, daughter of Abu Fawzi, one of Louis' friends. She spoke articulate grammar-book English, and was disarmingly frank. "You must come to my house this evening," was her second or third remark. I looked at the unpacked kit and the disordered room. "Perhaps to-morrow. You see, I've just arrived, all the way from Cairo, and my clothes are creased. And . . ."

"And by God, you come to our house this evening!" Those were her exact words, startling and penetrating. Louis remedied my clumsiness by assuring her that we come around to see her family at seven o'clock. In coarse, mannerless England you can refuse a first invitation from a newly met friend of a colleague, and none thinks badly of you. Unless you have the excuse of absence or illness, the Arab interprets your refusal as a sign of hostility.

Nadia smiled and reclined on my bed, dangling her legs. Though only 13, she looked 17, and was well filled out. She was dark, pensive, self-possessed, and her confident winning smile would have brought her a fortune in Hollywood. She vowed that although she was a Moslem she would never wear the veil, and would always dress in European clothes. "They can kill me before I wear the veil. My father sends me to the local Christian school."

I continued unpacking, whilst this child began asking questions and was obviously sizing up the new arrival. I felt distinctly uncomfortable. Her finger and toe nails were varnished crimson, a habit I later found to be very common amongst Moslem boys as well as girls. She was hatless, stockingless, wore sandals and a short flowery summer dress. At 20 she would be an Arab beauty of the type very common, but still very beautiful, throughout the Middle East. She was unique in that her active brain had plenty of scope for exercise. There were probably not a score of Moslem girls in all the Arab countries who at the age of 13 spoke English

and French, and sat at table in her own home with British soldiers.

We spent the evening with the family. We sat in a room furnished with a table, four chairs and a rough settee. On the bare walls were coloured propaganda pictures of Churchill, the King, Queen, the two Princesses and the President of Syria. In addition to Nadia there were several children, boys and girls. Little Hassan climbed all over me, and when not doing this he would stand silently in a corner or go outside into the courtyard and squat on his mattress bed. His blond curls, blue eyes and pretty face were the butt of his father's jokes. "If I'd known my son Hassan was going to be a girl I'd never have had him. Look at yourself, Hassoon, all dimples and blond curls. You put me to shame, a man who has had to fight and struggle all his life. To think that I could ever be the father of a dainty girl-boy like you. May Allah send you back to that place whence you came."

While the parents, Abu Fawzi and his wife Umm Fawzi, spoke (in French) of their life with an astonishing candour, Nahla, aged about 10, squatting on the floor studying French, eyed me with an air of suspicion. Her glinting black eyes had a demonish expression, and without moving her head she would flash her eyes in my direction with a fierce challenging look. "Don't mind Nahla," said her father. "She's only a savage little animal, and sometimes rules the home with her bad temper. But we let her do as she likes. It will bring out her strongest characteristics."

The family lived very simply. There were no carpets in the little four-roomed house, and the only beds were mattresses spread on the floor of the open courtyard. Abu Fawzi and his wife were outcasts. That the latter should go into the streets unveiled, and sit at the same table as her husband and his English guests, were unpardonable offences against the Koran and Moslem tradition. It warranted, and actually brought on, a silent, ceaseless persecution on the

part of the religious sheikhs and fanatics. Their openly professed anglophilic sentiments only made matters worse, and the most serious crime of all in official Syrian eyes was their close social contact with members of the British Security Service. Abu Fawzi had received ominous hints more than once, but this did not worry him so much as his unfulfilled vows to chastise a few of his enemies, whom he regarded as traitors who were planning to keep Syria under foreign (French) rule.

Umm Fawzi came of a wealthy family of southern Syria who had cut her off when she eloped with the penniless Farouk (now Abu Fawzi), a minor government official. She had married him because she loved him, knowing full well that in doing so she would never get another penny from her wealthy father. Her elopement, even in twentieth-century Republican Democratic Syria, was one of the group of worst crimes against Koranic law, custom and religious tradition. Any male member of her family, from father to cousin, would have been justified in taking her life. Abu Fawzi and his wife were revolutionaries who had achieved a remarkable but suffering emancipation. They belonged to the old Lawrence school, whose faith in Britain is as strong as their faith in Allah. They were more British than the English, basking in the Indian summer of a Lawrencian dream world, deplorably unaware of the new trends of Arab policy, which aims at a total emancipation of Middle East politics and economy from British and all other European influences. Abu Fawzi and his wife were at the same time fanatically nationalist, and regarded Britain as being the only Power capable of obtaining for Syria her full independence and ridding their country of French influences.

The whitewashed walls of the four barely furnished rooms were speckled with blood at many spots where the children had squashed mosquitoes. The kitchen had neither table nor chairs (which was not unusual in Moslem homes), Umm Fawzi doing her cooking whilst squatting on the floor. In

a corner stood a small noisy primus stove, on which was a pot in which rose-water was being distilled. Rose-water, I learned, was used to flavour cakes and perfume hands and face. On a shelf were glass jars containing olives pickled in olive oil, green walnuts preserved in syrup, grapes in arak, creamy goat's cheese and many other preserved foods. Outside in the courtyard Nadia insisted on picking a miserable little flower from a plant growing in a pot, and with the grace and charm of which only Arabs are capable, fastened it in the buttonhole of my K.D. shirt. She asked, somewhat naïvely, whether in England guests always received a flower from their host.

Meanwhile Umm Fawzi was laying the small table with arak, olives, goat's cheese, honey still in the cells of the comb, pimentoes, raw tomatoes and ground nuts made into a paste with grape juice. We sipped, nibbled, smoked and chatted in the disturbing presence of large numbers of malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Nahla had decided at last that she did not like me and attacked me viciously, gripping my left forearm with both her hands and setting her teeth into it. Then she punched me several times before dashing back to her corner, where she hissed and said, "Ente kelb" ("You're a dog"), certainly not a pretty compliment when uttered by a Moslem. Her mother tried to make her apologise, but she refused, and fought back until, yelling and screaming, she was overcome. Then she squatted on the floor in an aggressive alertness, smiling at me between spells of learning an irregular French verb. This mood did not last long, for she picked a quarrel with her younger sister Leila, who was lying on a mattress suffering from malarial fever. Nahla got another spanking, went howling into the courtyard, flung herself down on her mattress, set her teeth into it and kicked the air with her legs.

It was an evening for a celebration, and when Umm Fawzi had put all her brood, apart from Nadia, to bed, more arak appeared on the table. Umm Fawzi had a fine voice,

and broke into song. She sang for nearly three hours, three hours punctuated with laughter, gaiety and noisy chatter. She went through a whole repertoire of classical and folk-songs and Bedouin love-songs, which, in long-drawn wailing and suffering notes, with the unexpected pauses, suggest and reflect to a remarkable degree the mournful solitude of the desert, the desolation and silence, the raging hot winds, as well as the viciousness and hot-blooded fierceness of Arab emotions. The suffering of the Arab soul is heard in every song. There is no melody or rhythm in Arab music or song, only timing and pitch ; it is simple and straightforward, as simple and rough as the elements that make the Arab soul what it is.

It was midnight before Louis and I stumbled back across the rough ground and amongst the piles of corn in the public wheat compounds. Our uncertain steps bestirred pariah hound and watch-dog alike. The night was fresh, a powerful cooling wind sweeping down across the plain from the neighbouring Turkish and Kurdish mountains, whilst above us myriads of diamonds glittered and twinkled with a resplendent brilliance. Indoors, I rigged up my mosquito net, got in under it, and was asleep as soon as my head touched my greatcoat, which served as pillow.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SURFACE OF LOCAL LIFE

NEXT morning before sunrise the sky was aflame with crimson and gold. Not a breath stirred the cold air, and towards the flat roof of our building every sound from the town — for we were on the outskirts — came across sharp and clear. From the tall circular minaret of the near-by mosque a muezzin's voice, chanting monotonously and calling the quarter to prayer, rang out hoarsely, whilst below, in the sharp angle formed by the road fork, early arrivals for the market were shouting their donkeys over a worn path through the crumbling stones of the unfenced roadside cemetery. To the north and north-west the first rays of the sun cast a rosy glow on the highest peaks of the Turkish mountains, whilst eastwards across the steppe towards Aleppo a faint haze of smoke rose from villages in and beyond the belt of olive groves. Life seemed very sweet, and in that cold, dry, invigorating air there was an urge to activity.

Breakfast brought Sarkis, the Armenian. In voice and manner he was the clumsy buffoon, but it was apparent that he had a heart of gold and an honest pair of hands. In this latter respect I soon discovered that he was unique. He spoke a variety of English that suggested it had been chopped with a knife. "Coming one man. Him bring no-good information. I tell him, go away, sergeant not here, gone long ride." His monosyllabic speech was a masterly exposition of the effective use of simple words. While we ate his breakfast of fried eggs, followed by a dish of fresh peaches, he reclined without embarrassment on one of the beds (he was, unofficially, our servant), and talked about outstanding local characters. He knew all the "bad eggs", all the un-

published news, all that had taken place the night before. He knew, like everyone else, as it happened, about everyone who led a double existence. He knew, too, all the juicy tit-bits of scandal and the unprintable activities of the town's well-known sexual perverts. His opinions, of course, were not always sound, since much of his information was not first-hand ; nevertheless, his knowledge was remarkable.

Louis spent the morning introducing me to many of the leading notables and local government officials. Idlib, being the capital of a Caza (Prefecture) totalling 90,000 inhabitants in some 300 villages, had a numerous municipal staff, with most of whom I had to be personally acquainted. The Civil Governor was the Caimacam, and his adviser was the Mustashar, a French army officer, who had under his command a full squadron of the mounted Escadron Léger, a Circassian regiment of the French Colonial Army. We first called on leading wealthy citizens who were candidates at the forthcoming elections for the first Parliament of Independent Syria. Most of them lived in the small modern quarter, where the buildings were massive and built of light-cream stone, the exterior western architecture concealing very oriental interiors. In every house Persian carpets suspended from the walls gave warmth to the cold stone. Carpets also covered much floor space. Settees and armchairs in red or green plush and of cheap highly polished wood lent both a Victorian and a Dragian air to the oriental rooms. Not a single room looked normal, in spite of the opulence : it was immediately apparent that the oriental potentate cannot, by himself, achieve anything like a European interior. To do this he would have to employ European craftsmen. His own efforts produce a ridiculous, incongruous effect, with many things out of tone and harmony. In every room we entered the formal, European atmosphere had been spoiled by some ridiculous piece of furniture or a hideous clashing of styles and colours. The only things that looked normal were the fine Persian carpets. On many walls the only decoration was

a crudely framed and coloured quotation from the Koran, in large Arabic characters. These monstrosities looked like the earliest efforts of school children armed with ink brushes.

We sat in green plush armchairs, smoked local cigarettes, ate sticky toffees, drank coffee and answered or evaded polite questions about myself. How old was I? Was I married? Did I own many English villages? What price did gold fetch in England? Had I many gold sovereigns stored away in England? Could I spare some quinine pills? Had I any pretty coloured pictures to give away? The men who asked scores of such questions had fortunes and property running into hundreds of thousands of pounds. They all wore European clothes, and some preferred an open-necked shirt to stud and tie. They did not, of course, show or speak of their womenfolk, though hushed whispers and the soft patter of feet suggested that one or two came as far as the door with coffee. Six of the election candidates expressed a deep love for the English and hoped that we would soon throw the French out of the Levant, whilst remaining ourselves to give the new government a helping hand and form a bulwark against Russian influence. Only one was honest, saying he would work for total independence, which would be possible only after Syria had rid herself, as soon as the war was over, of both the French and the British.

What stood out above all else and seemed to the local notables far more important than the war was the existence of Anglo-French discord. The intention of the British was apparently to throw out the French and wrest the Mandate for themselves. It was, however, clear that the notables themselves had much to do with the discord between the two Allies: they created much of it and came to regard what they invented as being the true state of affairs. Most of them seemed to treat us in the matter as though we were children, making what they no doubt thought was an attempt to poison our minds against the French. They seemed to take it for granted that our mission in the area was to incite the local

population against the French, and that ultimately the British would throw the Mandatory Power out of the country neck and crop. Their simplicity so bewildered me that at moments I thought they were pulling my leg. But they were not. Perhaps they also tried to poison the mind of the French officer against us. They also spoke with much venom against their fellow notables, accusing them of pro-French activities. There seemed little else than personal spite and vituperation in the local politics.

We called on the Civil Governor at his office. He assumed a serious and important air, refrained from smiling and spoke only in Arabic. There were large puffy bags under his eyes, which had the pathetic expression of a St. Bernard. A St. Bernard's eyes look fine in the right animal, but they struck me as unsuitable in a Civil Governor. One of the town's notables had told me that the Civil Governor was a drug addict, so if this addiction was not the reason for the puffy bags then they may have been due to lack of sleep. There was not a sparkle of personality about the man. His features, his manner, his dulled temperament were mediocrity itself.

Outside we ran into a boisterous, jovial man of 55. Louis said this man had married thirty-eight times. We went to his house where, rare amongst Moslems, he spoke about some of the women he had married and divorced. He spoke roughly and coarsely of their qualities and defects, not unlike the farmer who discusses the good and bad points of his pigs and cattle.

“Thirty-four wives I've had, not counting the four I've got at the present time. I'm divorcing the oldest one next month, as I've recently been put on to a nice plump little houri in Aleppo, aged 15. Not every man has the misfortune to pick out thirty-eight barren women. Not a single one of them has been able to give me a son. But I'll go on marrying and divorcing until I find a woman capable of giving me a son. I am the butt of all my friends. Can you understand my humiliation? Perhaps it is Allah's wish that I should

die without a son, but none can say that I've not tried."

Our presence at his house had become known, for his friends and neighbours began arriving in twos and threes. They sat on chairs against the walls of the courtyard, sheltered from the sun by the thick foliage of a large overhead vine hanging with bunches of ripening grapes. Two menservants handed out cigarettes and coffee, whilst I did as my neighbour, and smoked, with complete failure, a nargileh (hubbly-bubbly). The sole topic of conversation was politics. I was asked to state the British Government's policy towards the projected Arab League. Louis' words flashed across my mind : " Let them do all the talking, and we'll do the listening ". The oriental discusses politics with an open mind, but in parables, and is very adept at concealing his own point of view. I spent much time parrying embarrassing questions with evasive answers. Anything which I said was likely to be distorted, mutilated, repeated and spread over the countryside. It was not an easy morning, for I was fully taxed absorbing the new environment, and making awkward efforts not to infringe local etiquette, without having to worry about politics and personalities. Conversation was in French, but I found myself already picking up many words of Arabic, especially from those who spoke in pidgin-French Arabic.

When the much-debated plans for an Arab League were tabled for discussion I realised I knew nothing of Middle East politics, and nothing of the aims of this new union of Arab States, which already had an unofficial existence, though it was not formally established until 1945. I let our friends do all the talking, and thus did not betray my ignorance. They actually taught me more about the Arab League than I ever knew previously. The diabolical anti-French machinations imputed by these notables to General Spears, British Minister in Syria, were also news to me. Many other questions were brought to my notice : they included Zionism, Turkey's designs on Aleppo, American oil interests, the Russian menace to Islam, and Britain's plans to establish a

Greater Syria under Emir Abdullah of Transjordan.

Our friends saw quickly through me, but felt there was no harm in trying out the newcomer. I was green, but had wits enough to hold my tongue. They were all burning to know a lot of things, in particular how Britain was going to use the Arab League and what she was going to decide for the Middle East. The future was thick with unsolved problems. They wanted something concrete and definite.

King Farouk's beard came up for discussion. "King Farouk," said one, "is growing a beard for a definite political purpose. . . . Farouk is a young man, aged 23. What does a beard do to a young man? It gives him added age and dignity, not so? . . . Farouk's friends want him to be political head of the Arab League and religious head of Islam, so they make him grow a beard so as to look old enough for a man's job. The head of the Arab League would automatically be head of all Sunni Moslems, and therefore virtually head of all Islam. But the Moslem world won't accept him as such. Firstly, his wife Farida runs around without a veil and like a half-clothed European. That shocks all good Moslems. Secondly, Farouk didn't raise a finger to defend Egypt against the Axis. Moslems won't readily forget that. We feel that Farouk is not worthy of the position, either politically or religiously. Egypt is decadent and too westernised. Farouk wants to boss the Arab world, and that is why the beard is on his face. What is England going to do? Why doesn't England back the Emir of Transjordan, and set him up as king of Greater Syria and head of Islam?"

The Mustashar, Captain Petitot, was the last on our list of visitors. His main task, like ours, was the security of the Turco-Syrian frontier, by barring the Middle East to Nazi military and political agents sneaking out of Europe through Turkey. But he had a whole lot of tasks of a petty nature, such as keeping the peace in the Arab countryside, curbing propaganda excesses by French-paid Arab soldiery, maintaining dignity and calm in the face of anti-French propa-

ganda and slanderous attacks by Syrians. He was possessed of sterling qualities that I later found lacking in many French officers stationed in the Levant states. It can be said that had all French officers in 1942-44 been of the same calibre as the Idlib Mustashar, the Franco-Syrian troubles that precipitated the ending of the Mandate would never have occurred. France would still to-day be welcome as the Mandatory Power. The influence of Vichy was strong in the French Officer Corps in the Levant, and only a half-hearted effort was made to root it out. After the British occupation of the Levant in 1941 many Vichyists were allowed to remain, and to scheme and plot against the British. They accused us of selfish motives ; when they saw us building roads and railways and airfields for the strategic defence of the Middle East against an invasion from the north, they said we needed them since we had come to stay and to take over the Mandate for ourselves.

Captain Petitot was a de Gaulloist *pur*. He co-operated fully with us, exchanged information without stint, and even relied on Louis and me to carry out tasks that he would not entrust to his Syrian officers. He also lent us soldiers when we needed any. Together we made it very clear to Idlib that there were no differences between the British and the French. Our work, however, came to nothing. In 1945, during the anti-French revolt, two French majors were lynched in the very office at the *Sérail* where Captain Petitot used to smooth out the differences. They were torn limb from limb in the presence of the helpless St. Bernard-eyed Caimacam by an infuriated mob of fanatics, dragged down the stone stairs and hanged from trees in the street outside.

Louis and I were able to achieve a perfect understanding with the Mustashar. There were no language difficulties, and both of us had had long personal connections with France. I had always felt as much at home in France as in England, whilst Louis' French stamped him as an out-and-out Parisian.

The trifling difficulties with which Captain Petitot had to contend were well illustrated during my first visit to him. Fighting had broken out in a village, and he had sent soldiers to restore order and seize illegal arms. Incidentally, his soldiers had saved the local gendarmes from the anger of the infuriated villagers, who had resented their interference in their private war. No sooner had the soldiers arrived than they were accused of robbery and rape. These were rumours maliciously spread by Idlib gossips, though the gendarmes, whose comrades had been saved from murder through the intervention of the French Circassian soldiers, did nothing to contradict the rumours. The fighting had its roots in the deep rancour harboured by the village factions, dating from some trivial incident in the last century. The gendarmes had intervened to restore order, but as they were not numerous enough, they had to send for French help. The net result was another outburst of anti-French propaganda. Captain Petitot's task went further than the mere quelling of fighting. There was plenty of German money just across the frontier waiting to be used to stir up trouble and embarrass the Allies in the Arab countries. The Mustashar had the arduous task of trying to trace the real cause of fighting: it happened not once in the Arab countryside, but dozens of times. It was not always wise to accept the local version that village wars were due solely to ill feeling amongst the differing factions.

We ended the morning with a visit to an arak distillery, of which the little town had six. Moslems are forbidden to manufacture or drink alcohol, and though they own no distilleries they are the largest consumers of arak. The lucrative industry was in the hands of Christians. Of Idlib's 25,000 inhabitants, about 1000 were Christians of the Greek Orthodox faith, practising rites very akin to those of the Church of England. The first grapes of the season were in. Two or three tons lay on the floor in a mass of mud, good healthy red soil moistened by the juice of grapes. Two men

in bare feet, their sirwals pulled up to their knees, were marking time on the grapes. A trough sunk in the floor received the muddy stream and retained it to allow some of the sediment to sink to the bottom. It was then drained into a vat down in the basement, and under the vat was a wood fire which kept the juice at a constant temperature. From the top of the vat sloped a simple pipe from which dripped the distilled vapour.

In matters of alcoholic drink the ugly head of a resurgent Islam was beginning in Syria to show itself. Independence was just around the corner, and already the religious tolerance imposed by the French was beginning to disappear. The drinking of arak within fifty metres of a mosque is forbidden by law, though the drinkers are all Moslems. It is a ridiculous law that the French never applied. But during our visit to the distillery we were asked to intervene with the Syrian *gendarmerie* on behalf of a Greek café owner. His establishment was twenty yards from a mosque, though none had ever forbidden him to sell arak. With the independent government not yet in office, the *gendarmerie* had warned the Christian Greek that if he continued to sell arak or, alternatively, did not move his café it would be closed. The case was symptomatic of the early rumblings of Syrian Independence that was soon — and very soon — to express itself in an intensified feudalism and fanaticism.

## CHAPTER III

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

THOUGH Louis and I spent many days and nights away from Idlib (we kept our journeys and destinations a secret) we were well informed of what went on under the surface of the placid life of the little town. At least we thought we were well informed, but Moslem life has so many elusive aspects that possibly we did not hear about some of the illicit things that went on. Apart from our responsibility for the security of the frontier area, we had many other duties about which our friends made rash and speculative guesses. It was essential that we knew everything about life in the town, and at the same time keep our own intentions and enquiries a secret. Close contact with all kinds of people and access to countless houses and homes provided an accurate picture of the background to local life.

The old town, where nine-tenths of the population lived, was compact and cramped, intersected by a single narrow street. All the other "streets" were no more than dusty, stony alleys, and entrance to houses was gained only through wooden doors built in the high windowless walls that bordered these narrow alleys. Often the doors were massive and iron-studded. You banged the iron-fist knocker until a voice cried : "Min ?" ("Who ?"). It was often a woman's voice. You shouted out who you were, whereupon a man would come and let you in. Invariably you stepped into a large, clean, tiled courtyard, sheltered from the burning rays of the sun by a trellised vine or by one or two fig trees. From the courtyard a stone stairway led up to the men's and visitors' quarters, whilst downstairs were the harem, or women's quarters, the kitchen, store-room, and in some

houses the stable for the family donkey or mule. Even inside these secluded houses, isolated by a high stone wall from the alley outside, the women lived a separate existence from their menfolk. Unless we were on official duty we rarely saw a woman in any house, and it was an affront to our host to make an enquiry after a member of his family who was not a male.

A Moslem friend first introduced me to the kind of social evening that frequently takes place in these secluded houses. They were parties for men, to which women were never admitted, though I was able to get an occasional glimpse of women's parties. When hilarious all-night singing kept Louis and me awake we would get up and look from a stairway window across the dark courtyard into the lighted open windows opposite. Or we would go to the roof and look down across the courtyard into the opposite rooms. At this peeping-Tom practice we were unseen, but bearing in mind that we wanted to know of everything that went on, we would watch the unveiled women without any sense of unfairness. When Moslem women get together at a party their suppressed personalities break forth into gay song and dance. It was hard to believe that the young women who swayed their hips, writhed like snakes and yodelled all the night through were the same veiled, unhappy and oppressed creatures of the daylight hours. By day they hid their faces and scuttled from sight at the sound of a man's voice on their doorstep.

I was warned that I would not enjoy my first stag party, but felt that the novelty alone would drive away boredom. Settees and armchairs were formed into a closed circle in a room in the centre of which was a long table laden with tasty *hors d'œuvres* and arak. A score of men, two of them playing mandolins, were present. After introductory hand-shakes all round Louis and I were given armchairs set against the table spread with food and drink. There were intermittent Bedouin songs, strumming of wailing tunes and patches of trivial conversation. Our uninvited intrusion had damped

spirits, but the arak drinking soon revived them. As the empty bottles began rapidly to increase, the most obscene stories and jokes I had ever heard, translated into French for my benefit, dropped from alcoholic lips. The stories were not of the "smutty" type one expects to hear in any British army camp : they were long, descriptive stories of sordid scenes of obscenity. Half the arak that was poured out for me I emptied down between my legs on to a fine Persian carpet. I had heard that such parties occasionally ended in knife and pistol fights, so I was determined to remain sober and make for the door as soon as trouble started. At the time, I didn't know the warning was a leg-pull, but a year later I came across such games. Many of the men present were giving expression to pronounced animal instincts, and though over half of them were married, a few to more than one wife, they indulged in hand-holding and caressed their neighbours. A mandolin player would strum a love tune whilst some of the men around him would act the song, making love to an imaginary woman by going through the motions with their masculine neighbour. It was difficult to understand such behaviour. Arabs are not soft or effeminate : without exception they are excellent horsemen ; they have all at one time or another been engaged in fights with fist, pistol, rifle or knife ; later, at various times, I tramped with Arabs who were inadequately clothed and wet to the skin, through miles of sticky quagmire ; I have seen rich men get down to sleep on the bare freezing ground. They take such inconveniences in their stride, as a matter of course. They are tough without knowing it. Why, then, such orgies of effeminacy at parties ? This first occasion was not the only one ; it was typical.

It is probably true to say that the sedentary Arab is not capable of affection towards a woman. He treats her as he treats beasts of burden ; women are not in the same category as men, and are judged not by their beauty or character, but by their capacity for performing menial and arduous

tasks. The married Arab Moslem is undisputed lord and master, he kicks his wife about, he virtually ignores her, refuses her permission to eat at his table or platter, and denies her all access to and share in his own social life. How then is it possible for him to be romantic? How can he show any real affection when it is natural and traditional to browbeat her? I later saw, near the River Euphrates, a rare case of subhuman behaviour; to describe it would hardly be just, lest it be regarded as a regular practice. I am writing only of general conduct. Though an extreme case, it showed the extent to which the harsh treatment of women can go. Somewhere in the Arab make-up there exist elusive sentiments of romance and affection, but since he cannot achieve these sentiments in a normal way in his married life, he shows them in the only kind of company where tradition does not forbid them, that is, amongst his fellow males, with whom he shares all his secrets. There is a wide gulf between man and wife, and there are very few exceptions to the general practice. I knew of only one exception at Idlib, and, as such, the couple suffered endless persecution.

Outwardly, Idlib was both placid and mysterious, though I did not observe any of the oriental glamour that English travellers write books about. You could feel there was an under-surface world, which, if not quite an underworld, was a world different from that which appeared on the surface. You could sense the existence of an elusive and illicit side to Idlib life, unspoken of and unknown, yet tacitly assumed, and, amongst the few initiates, admitted. This under-surface life went on mostly at night, and was suggested by human shadows fleeting along ill-lighted alleys, by dark forms, disturbed and hurrying with silent feet around a corner, and by whispered conversations at café tables, followed by furtive departures.

Of Idlib's 25,000 people, 5000 were eligible bachelors who complained they could not marry because of the shortage of unmarried women. So many men had three or four wives

apiece that there were not enough for everybody. Five thousand eligible young men were enough to form the nucleus of several underworlds, which grow and thrive on human emotions and abnormalities. There were plenty of these in the town. Unlike the larger Syrian towns, such as Damascus, Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor and Hama, Idlib was without authorised brothels. It had the usual very small number of young women who had strayed from the Koranic path, and these, under Syrian law, were liable for dispatch to the official brothels. Any woman known to lose her virginity before marriage is put to death by one of her male relatives. Under this family code of honour any married woman who commits adultery runs the same terrible risk. A few girls, however, escape this rigorous punishment by running away, hiding or getting set up in a private practice under the wing of a woman who, here, strangely enough, as elsewhere, was referred to as "Madame". Only the very initiated people ever knew about the one or two houses at Idlib which sheltered such young women. There may have been more: they were exceedingly hard to unearth. It was our job to unearth them, for the unseen world of Idlib was the one place to lay hands on some of the suspects wanted by the authorities.

Another type of young girl who at the age of 15 or 16 is married by her parents, in consideration of a handsome price payable in English gold sovereigns or Turkish gold pounds, to a doddery old fool already married two or three times, quickly tires of married life. She continues to live in the house, or in one of the houses of her polygamous husband, but she spends many of her afternoons at secret *maisons de tolérance*. Two or three such women get taken under the wing of a woman who fixes secret rendezvous for them with rich Moslems and young effendis. Arrivals and departures are furtive and risky, and when the *gendarmerie* get to know of the existence of such houses, hush bribes have to be paid and the visits of gendarmes tolerated. Once the payment of the bribe ceases, the position of the girls becomes delicate.

They may get put to death by a male member of their family, or by their husband, but they are more likely, if they live in a large town, to get sent to the official brothels.

People often came to us with denunciations concerning arms and drug traffic, political suspects, Nazi agents and Arab "traitors" who were plotting to keep French rule in the country. Our knowledge of local characters and affairs was extensive enough to enable us to sense whether a denunciation was false. Four out of five denunciations seemed to be made out of spite and were not worth our while to follow up. Now and again, without telling our informants, we did make enquiries on the strength of their denunciations. The enquiries led us to all sorts of places in the area, to houses buried away in the maze of alleys, and even to distant places such as Hama. However, it was virtually impossible to catch anyone *en flagrant délit*, but the raids that were failures had a salutary effect. They taught people that we were not asleep.

Idlib had the reputation of being the heaviest hashish-smoking place in the country. The drug only interested us so long as it was still growing in the ground or was on its illicit way to Egypt. Anywhere else, it did not interest us. The British army in the Levant (the ghostly 9th Army that did not fire an angry round after July 1941) worked in the anti-hashish drive in conjunction with the local government on behalf of the Egyptian Narcotics Bureau, which was under British control. Hashish is used in Egypt solely as a very powerful sexual stimulant, and the Narcotics Bureau has the main responsibility of rescuing the rotting manhood of Egypt from its deadly effects. Since evidence pointed to there being a large dealer at Idlib, Louis and I decided to look into things a little. We sent for hashish to a dealer, and we smoked hashish at the house of an addict in an attempt to obtain information. The addict empties Turkish cigarettes of their tobacco, mixes the green powder with it and very adeptly repacks the mixture into the cigarette paper.

An early effect of inhaling the smoke of a hashish cigarette is light-headedness, and a mental and visual enlargement of anything on which the attention is focused. Colours become starkly vivid and intensified, and anything which serves to satisfy the senses, such as a bunch of grapes or a piece of cheese, becomes trebly luscious and alluring.

There seemed to be no lack of hashish in the town. It was being sold at 3s. a dram. After carefully collating evidence and information supplied by people unknown to each other, Louis and I made a well-timed raid on the shop and house of a reputedly big dealer. Our visit surprised him. We pulled up carpets and matting, emptied cupboards, turned the bedding inside out, looked under loose tiles in the courtyard, searched amongst pistachios and peanuts, in sweet jars and sacks of vegetables ; we probed everywhere. We found no hashish. But the man was in possession of a Turkish as well as a Syrian identity card. He was thus an habitual frontier crosser, as much at home in Turkey as in Syria. We handed him over to the *gendarmerie* for being in possession of two cards, but the next day we learned that he had been invited to lunch by one of the leading local government officials. We had not lost face, for the finding of his Turkish identity card had justified our search. He was neither fined nor imprisoned, and continued to sell hashish.

From morning to night our time was often spent in the company of townspeople or peasants, and we got to know the standard types well enough to judge whether their fabulous rumours ever contained a grain of truth. If rolling stones gather no moss, Syrian grains of truth got embedded in ever-growing snowballs of fiction. To change the metaphor, hard fact was invariably lost in a mist of fancy. A simple question calling for a simple direct answer could be asked of a man a dozen times, with twelve different replies. Every thought was wrapped in a parable.

Doubtful characters often lodged in the khans, rough inns for man and his pack-animal, very similar to the *posadas* in

Spain. The camel, donkey, horse or mule is tethered at night in the rough stony and dirty courtyard that is open to the sky. An outside staircase leads to the balcony, which looks down on it from the four sides. Access to the sleeping rooms is gained from the balcony. Travellers, when they are numerous, as on the nights prior to market days, sleep in serried rows on mattresses placed on the floor. It was with sinister pleasure that we sometimes knocked up the khans between midnight and the early hours. It was no sight for tender eyes to see about a score of men, sleeping on the floor of a small room, stir to life under a bright light, for some would be fully clothed, some in underpants and vest, a few in trousers only, others in rags and shreds of clothing from which would emerge a naked thigh or a white shoulder. It would be a hot, fetid mass of humanity, men from the lowest class of Arab society, sick and ailing but full of good cheer and innate wisdom. The stench of dirty clothing and unwashed bodies in the shuttered room was foul. If we found a man we were looking for we would search him. We would unwind the body sash which served as belt and purse, and shake out the contents. Rolls of sweat-damp bank-notes would slip out, and quite frequently a little cloth bag would fall to the ground with a happy jingle. In it would be perhaps Turkish gold pounds, but more likely the coins would be English gold sovereigns. Later, during my wanderings, I saw countless thousands of gold sovereigns, the cherished property of Arab peasants and farmers. The oriental connoisseur of gold will not exchange a George V sovereign for a Queen Victoria one, as the latter is slightly smaller and contains a fraction less metal. It was fashionable for Syrian women of all classes to wear bracelets made of English gold sovereigns. One sometimes wondered whether propaganda is worth its cost.

One night, accompanied by a gendarme, we visited a khan and knocked on the door of a room known to contain two beds of European type. In one bed was a Moslem, in the

other a Christian woman. They were not the people we were looking for, but the incident was such a flagrant breach of religious custom that the gendarme was completely bewildered. It was also the first time I had seen a woman in a khan, but then, it was none of my business. The gendarme remarked in French that it would be best to withdraw to think things over and to consider taking some kind of action. We told him to forget about it ; but he could not. He went back to his H.Q. to read up some instructions and get advice. He was determined that a Moslem who slept in the same room as a Nazarite woman should be punished. Next day we were out on the road looking for an individual and holding up all the traffic. We found the Moslem and his Christian girl friend in a bus travelling to Aleppo. The man winked at us. We understood. Like the hashish case, it was just another of those little oriental mysteries.

Clues picked up at Idlib led us to a village twenty miles away. Rumour had it that every man in the village was armed, some with British rifles. It was not normally serious, for most peasants were armed, but in the frontier area an armed village could easily have been bought with German money should there have been trouble between the Allies and Turkey. The Moslem countryside was politically loyal to him who paid most. In the village we were taken to a very charming, frail and pallid woman. She was unveiled and received us with great courtesy. She spoke fluent French and was, we learned, the sister of one of Syria's leading poets. She sat with us on the floor, and after coffee was brought and the long courtesies finished with, we got down to business. She was very helpful, and confirmed that every man in the village was armed. There were at least 350 illegally held weapons in the village. The week before 30 rifles had been smuggled down from the Alawite mountains, resulting in local factional feeling running high. Local feeling did not interest us. Our business was to find out who was supplying the arms, and for what motives. It

could easily have been Axis money buying over frontier Arabs.

You may as well ask an Englishman to surrender his wallet as to ask an Arab to surrender his rifle. We agreed on a plan, parleyed for two days at the village, and were promised 60 weapons, all of which would be voluntarily surrendered. We arranged to return a few days later to raise the figure to 100. But meanwhile the Military Police from Aleppo, accompanied by gendarmes, made a night raid on the village and seized only seven weapons. With the searching of the first house the alarm spread through the village, and nearly every man dug out his rifle or pistol and filed past the thin cordon in the black of night in a mass escape to the hills. The raid was an utter failure, and when Louis and I returned to resume our talks we were frigidly received and accused of staging the raid after promising not to. Though the raid was carried out without our knowledge, we failed to convince the villagers of this. They were certain we had let them down. The British Military Police would not know where to find the hidden rifles, and, of course, they got no co-operation from the gendarmes. The peasant hides his rifle in the mud wall of his house, covering the hole with plaster or white-washed mud. Though the inexperienced Military Police could not have known this, the gendarmes must have known. The clumsy and precipitate action of the Military Police, without consulting us at Idlib, brought no other result than an outbreak of anti-British feeling, made all the more intense because of the villagers' conviction that Louis and I had broken a promise. Not only the village, but the whole countryside was having the laugh on us. We could not afford to lose prestige, especially as the Russians, as well as the Western Allies, were suffering military set-backs. Much of the Arab world, especially the unconvinced part, was getting back on the fence, not quite sure which side would win. It could not be said they were exactly anti-British or anti-Allied. They did not care who won, but they wanted to be in good favour

with the winners. Louis and I, betrayed to the *gendarmerie* by a peasant, had lost a battle of wits. Instead of collecting the promised weapons at once, we played for a higher figure. The *gendarmerie* had panicked the unsuspecting Military Police into a night raid which they knew would be fruitless. Where the British or French had trouble with the villages, the gendarmes were with the latter every time.

Louis and I were often working in conjunction with the *gendarmerie* and the Syrian Security Officers employed by the French Deuxième Bureau. Within a week of my arrival at Idlib I had been initiated into the methods employed by these Syrians to extract information from prisoners and suspects. Since many of these were of as much interest to us as to the French, we preferred to be present to hear the actual confession or the disclosing of information rather than wait for it to be handed to us later in an exaggerated form or perhaps toned down under the soothing influence of bribes. We therefore witnessed many cases of physical violence and torture inflicted on innocent as well as guilty men. The proceedings always opened with extremely vigorous face-slapping, under which an occasional suspect would break down at once. If face-slapping failed, increasingly painful and progressive methods of persuasion were used. The more stoical victims could stand up to much punishment. I noticed, when witnessing these ugly scenes, that the gendarmes or security officers were often enjoying their task. The powerful streak of sadism in the Arab character found full play in the highly developed third-degree pressure applied by these officials.

I recalled the words of an army instructor. His words were his own personal advice on the attitude of mind the army should adopt in order to defeat the ruthless enemy. "There is one thing you must always remember, and one thing you must always forget: REMEMBER that there is no such thing as fair play. FORGET that you ever played a game called cricket. In other words, be utterly ruthless." I

turned these words over in my mind at Idlib, and subsequently at other places where I was stationed.

After seeing the gendarmes and security inspectors at work, it was clear that they had never heard of fair play or cricket. Further, it was obvious that all orientals were attuned to the idea of suffering, violence and even torture. Every prisoner knew what was coming to him, and resigned himself to it. To all of them all punishment was inflicted at Allah's wish. Thus spiritually fortified, many of them could withstand very painful torture : it often lasted a long time. The oriental official knows best how to deal with his fellows — with utter ruthlessness. And the confessor shows a more healthy respect for extreme rather than half-hearted violence. Sometimes there was no other way to get information. It was the traditional way.

## CHAPTER IV

### FANATICAL ISLAM

BEFORE visiting Syria I had never seen religious fanaticism at work. It does not exist in the English-speaking world, and the anti-Jewish terror in various European countries did not seem to be due to religious fervour. From the moment that religious fanaticism in Syria first forced itself upon my attention, I regarded it with an open mind. It was something entirely new to my experience, a thing I had only vaguely heard about, but at Idlib it was accepted as a part of the daily routine. Before going to the Orient I had had a fixed notion that religious fanaticism was due to a desire to revolt against the oppression of another faith. I soon discovered that this notion was just another of those false and superficial ideas we acquire in the course of our shoddy English schooling. Nearly every day at Idlib there were incidents which proved the ominous and disturbing presence of Islamic fanaticism, and no person, whether Christian or Moslem, could treat with levity the religious customs and Koranic law as they were understood and interpreted by the local fanatics.

Louis and I were taking coffee one evening on the flat roof of a small house set amongst the olive groves, about a mile from the town. Across the sea of olive-green trees the compact mass of white houses of Idlib were enshrouded in a delicate evening pink. The varied medley of the familiar sounds of early evening life came loud and clear across the still air. The western sky was luscious with rich colours merging one into the next, from deep crimson to rose, from rose to gold and gold to a faint tint of green. Far away to the north-west the mountains of Turkey loomed deep blue

and purple. It was not an evening to discuss the aspects of religious fanaticism: nevertheless, we were supposed to know all about it, for Islamic fanaticism was playing its part in Arab morale and the Christian minority question. It was closely woven into the social and religious fabric. Our host, a Christian Arab by the name of Tewfik, remarked in answer to something I had said, "Islam is a great religion. But to-day it is sordid: it is divorced from the ideals and principles preached by the Prophet. To-day it does not fit. It is carried on in a warped tradition. It brings out the worst in men, and encourages them to seek the worst in others. How can you expect a Moslem to notice the natural beauty of a Syrian sunset when his mind is fixed on the forty wives he will get when he reaches paradise?"

Tewfik's interesting point about fanaticism was that the government knew virtually nothing of its widespread practice. Nor did the individual fanatic receive encouragement from above. Any action he took to warn or punish those who infringe the Koranic code was carried out on his own individual initiative. He did not refer to the powers that be or consult any authority or chief in the matter. The fanatic was his own judge, and personally carried out his own judgment. He made no explanations to anyone, nor did he boast of his deeds. A small number of such fanatics operating in a small town, for the most part unknown to one another, had the cumulative effect of a secret terrorist society. The fanatics seemed to be the only Syrians capable of swift and decisive action.

Tewfik was one of their victims. Because two female relatives, visiting him from Aleppo, went about in public without the black veil, unknown fanatics each night destroyed two of his valuable olive trees. Being Christians, the two women were not compelled to veil themselves, but the fanatics thought differently. The destruction of the trees ceased only when the two women went away again. They stubbornly refused to wear the Moslem veil, and cut short

their holiday in order to prevent the further destruction of the valuable trees.

It was apparent from this and other little incidents, especially in the matter of the sale of alcohol, that the forthcoming change from French Mandatory rule to self-government would be marked by a return to Koranic law and to religious discrimination. During their twenty years' rule the French had preserved religious liberty and prevented any violent fanaticism against non-Moslems. Already the Christians of Idlib were getting a foretaste of what they might expect when the French had gone and independence was complete. Islam was awakening, spurred on by the new hopes of Arab political unity, which was an ultimate aim of the newly framed Arab League. Another factor that was awakening Islam was political Zionism in Palestine, which, in the unanimous opinion of all Moslems, was aiming at the establishment of a Jewish Empire once Palestine had been usurped from the Arabs. In small religious centres like Idlib, where Zionism was no more than an ugly name, the Christians would come in for some rough handling, since the Islamic mob is inspired by the single idea to destroy all religion but its own.

At Idlib religious fanaticism expressed itself in many interesting forms. I need not describe here in detail how the silent hidden hand of the fanatic struck at Abu Fawzi and his family because of their close friendship with Louis and me except to note that he was singled out for discriminatory treatment and had his pay as a government official reduced. The discrimination against this Moslem family went so far as to make it difficult for Umm Fawzi to do her shopping.

One evening, strolling along the road that fringes the olive groves, I came upon two local men maltreating a youth of about 18. When Arab thrashes Arab he does it soundly. I asked the cause of the severe beating the youth was undergoing. "By God, he was standing here looking at that group of women." Under an olive tree, about thirty yards

away, was a group of middle-aged women wearing black clothes and veils. It was a custom at Idlib for poorer-class Moslem women to foregather and squat under an olive tree in the cool of evening and gossip about the day's scandal and doings. I asked (and my question must have appeared very naïve to the two men) what objection they had to the youth's gazing at a few veiled women.

"He might be able to do it in Aleppo, but, by Allah, he may not do it here. No man may delay his step to look at a woman."

England's watch committees might usefully take a leaf from the Idlib fanatic's book.

Honour-killing of female relatives is probably the worst form of Islamic fanaticism. Whilst we were lunching at a village chieftain's house one day, a villager, brushing past a servant, entered the room, livid with rage and his eyes gleaming fiendishly. He looked like fanaticism about to burst. Asked his business, he announced in surprisingly calm and rational words that a strange man had been visiting his widowed mother. Could he borrow a rifle to kill her? He looked about 30, but he knew neither his own nor his mother's age. Questioned closely, he admitted having no real proof of his mother's guilt, but there was a lot of gossip amongst his neighbours, two of whom had seen a strange man near his mother's house. The peasant was sent away without a rifle, and was advised to obtain infallible proof before killing his mother. To my unaccustomed mind this advice came as a shock. He was told, not to forget about it, but to obtain proof. The village elders in the room with me were ready to condone the killing if the peasant (not the law of the country) found proof of his mother's guilt. I could see that the man's determination to end his mother's life was inflexible. Forgiveness in such a matter is unthinkable. The next time I visited that village I learned that the man had managed to find a weapon and had done the deed. He had then given himself up to the *gendarmerie*, who detained

him a couple of weeks whilst conducting their enquiry into the case. Then he was released, a free man, having taken the law into his own hands, as prescribed in the Koran by the Prophet, and having cleansed the family honour that had been so foully soiled by one of its female members.

One Ahmed was playing cards with three other men (this was unusual, for few Arabs ever play cards) at a café in a small town. One of the men cheated, whereupon Ahmed got angry, saying he objected to playing cards with men who had no honour. "Honour?" exclaimed one of his friends, "Honour? You of all people, Ahmed, talk about honour, when, some twenty-five years ago, in the last war, your mother, when she was pregnant with you, was kissed by a man outside this very café. You were not yet born, and your father was away in Arabia fighting for the Turks against Lawrence. You didn't know that, did you? If you had any honour, you would get square with that man."

"Who was he?" asked Ahmed.

"Abdullah ibn K——, who still lives at the village of R——."

Ahmed at once left the table, took his horse and his rifle, went to R—— and killed Abdullah ibn K——, who had kissed his mother twenty-five years before. Ahmed could not kill his own mother, who was dead, so poor Abdullah, grown into an old man, had to be murdered in cold blood so that the stain on Ahmed's family honour — unknown to him until then — could be washed away.

A callous murder took place in the district where I was stationed about a year later. A peasant girl became pregnant out of wedlock. To say the least, it was a unique incident in the Arab countryside. The parents of both parties, to avoid scandal and an orgy of honour-washing, conferred together and arranged an immediate wedding between the girl and her lover. The couple were, by Moslem standards, quite happy and contented. But not so the girl's brother and her two cousins. They also conferred together, and waited

until the child was born before taking action. They went to the house when the husband was out, cut the throats of both the girl and the infant, and waited till they both bled to death. They then gave themselves up to the *gendarmerie*, confident of being let off. But their ignorance of Koranic law cost them fifteen years apiece. They were acquitted of the murder of the woman, whose life they had the right to take, but they were found guilty of the murder of the infant. Their behaviour reveals the remarkable mentality which compels men to satisfy the blood-lust and fanaticism demanded by their religion. Such murders take place regularly all over Syria, and at Idlib honour-killings occurred with a surprising frequency.

Syria has been accepted into U.N. as a democratic nation. Fit for her own type of self-government she may be, but why the word "democratic"? One cannot quarrel with the practice of fanaticism or the denial of all human rights to women, if the Syrians want things that way. But Syria's loose interpretation of the word democracy is an insult to U.N.

Not infrequently at Idlib, one of our acquaintances or friends would point out to me that veiled women promenading in pairs or in threes were married to the same husband. Bigamy is practised on a large scale in England, but I have never heard of three wives of the same Englishman taking a stroll arm-in-arm. We are told by English travellers, who hurry through the Arab lands and write books about them, that polygamy is fast dying out. My experience is the contrary. Polygamy was more prevalent in towns than amongst the peasantry, but in villages in our area the practice was far from extinct. It was impossible to compute what percentage of married men led a polygamous life. The large number of bachelors who were unable to marry because of the shortage of eligible girls was an indication of a fairly high percentage of polygamy amongst those who could afford more than one wife. And this fortunate and privileged section of the com-

munity was by no means a small one, for the town and district were extremely wealthy.

Sometimes even poor Moslems succeeded in keeping two homes going. The head ghaffir (watchman) at a disused air-field near Idlib managed, on 6s. 6d. a day, to keep two wives and families living in different houses. He was always asking me to get him an increase in pay. "Sergeant," he would plead, "I shall have to divorce one of my wives if you don't get me more pay. Can't you see Captain G—— at Nerab and ask him to give me more pay? Each of my wives has two children, and, by God, if I have to divorce one of them what are the little ones going to do?" When I suggested that he put both families into one house he replied that his wives would quarrel. His only solution was more pay, which, if granted, would only result in his taking a third wife.

A good friend of mine was a regular soldier, a Circassian serving in the French Escadron Léger. Aged 65, he was a fine fellow, the son of Russian Moslems who had emigrated down from the Caucasus in the 1860's. His pretty wife was only 19, and he was very proud of their little son, aged three years. One evening when going to his house for dinner I thought he was taking me the wrong way. I had previously been to his house for coffee, but the dinner was to be in another house of which I had no knowledge. I said nothing, but noticing my air of curiosity, he explained away this second house. "I eat at this house," he said, "and sleep at the other one. I have two wives, the first of which failed to give me a son. She is barren. So I had to marry a second time. My young wife has a full-time job raising a family for me; my older wife has no children, but she is an excellent cook. So I bring my friends here for dinner. You see," he added, with not a little French-inspired wit, "in spite of my age I have two appetites, with a wife for each. I look after them both to the best of my ability." For a Moslem his attitude towards women was exceptionally

generous, due to his coming under French influence.

An unusual and unofficial deputation called on Louis and me one evening. It asked for our intervention with the Syrian Government, through the army authorities, for the opening of an official brothel at Idlib. It often happened that a young man would be negotiating through a broker with a girl's parents when, before the price had been fixed, a rich man would step in with a bag of gold sovereigns and take her. The girl's parents were interested only in the highest offer and a good connection socially: it did not matter that the bidder already had three legal wives. The young men without great fortune, unless they had personality and determination, were doomed to remain bachelors. Hence the request for an official brothel.

The deficiency in unmarried girls was met in part by a flourishing market in Alawite servants, but here again the rich Moslems got the best pickings. The market is at Latakia, a small port on the Mediterranean, formerly the capital of the once autonomous French-sponsored Alawite Mountain State. The servants are bought or hired through brokers, and the prices vary from about 300 lira (£34) to six or seven times this amount. A well-built attractive servant may fetch even more. A contract is prepared by which the employer promises to return the servant to her parents when he no longer requires her services, but he is expected to employ her for at least five years. This arrangement renders it unnecessary for the more progressive town Moslems to marry a second wife. In Aleppo, Damascus and other towns are many wealthy Moslems who try to lead a Western social life, allowing their wives to go about unveiled and even permitting them to share their own social activities. It is therefore inconvenient to have more than one official wife, so the Alawite servant fills a terrible gap.

The former Alawite State was very close to our conception of Ruritania. The pro-French Suleiman Murshid was head of the State, and proclaimed himself "God of the

Alawites". His illiterate mountain people did actually believe in his divinity. He had a small private army of rough mountaineers who formed a guard of honour for distinguished visitors calling on him in his slummy village. Suleiman Murshid was a big rotund individual suffering from obesity, with a huge paunch and rolls of fat round his neck. He was a feudal chief and a professional bandit. In 1943 his mountainous territory was placed out of bounds to British military personnel when it was learned that the god made a practice of severing the ears of those of his subjects who were suspected of passing information to British "agents". Murshid's hospitality was generous to the extent of attaching pretty unveiled "servants" to his guests for the duration of their stay. The guest, incidentally, could make his selection from a bunch of ravishing beauties. Later, Murshid found himself interned at Mieh-Mieh, the famous Levant internment camp near Sidon reserved for enemy aliens and security suspects. Finally, early in 1947, he was hanged in Damascus, ostensibly for banditry, but more likely for his long record of pro-French activities.

*CHAPTER V*  
**SURIYA REPUBLICA**

THE numerous election candidates at Idlib, most of them feudal lords, were getting active, some of them for the first time in their indolent lives. Only one of them was normally an active man as we understand it. Wrongly assuming that Louis and I were in the area to win support for the British cause, some of them invited us to dinner and to brief tours of the villages. We had to accept all or none of the invitations, so as not to be accused of favouring any one of them to the detriment of the others. These invitations made us realise how much prestige we enjoyed, for some candidates judged that nothing would help them better to get elected than to make it known they had our official backing. It is a wide step from accepting a luncheon invitation to sponsoring a candidate, but that is how all Idlib saw it. The first candidate with whom we dined let it be known that we were his political friends.

However, these political contacts gave us a unique insight into Syrian and Levantine affairs, but Louis flatly refused to make tours of the villages with any of them. We made it clear that we wished to have nothing to do with Syrian politics : the country was to become an independent republic, and must elect its representatives without any foreign influence. It was rumoured that High-Up French and British alike were financing their big political friends, but we knew nothing about that. Small fry like Field Security had to keep their nose out of internal politics, though unofficially we had a watching brief on the conduct of the elections. The candidates were split roughly into three groups, pro-French, pro-British and pro-Syrian. Since the

Moslem must by nature find a strong prop to lean against, it was too much to expect the candidates to be very original. Their policies were limited by their selfish motives and by their tradition of clinging to one or another of the Western Allies. All were violently anti-Russian, and the pro-Nazis confined themselves to a policy of complete independence, freed from all foreign influences. When we asked one candidate what his policy was, he asked us what we thought he ought to adopt as the best policy. His only real policy was to sit in the Parliament at Damascus, but he did not know quite what to say to the peasants in order to get votes. Vaguely all the candidates proclaimed that they were going to press for the modernisation of agriculture, though it was safe to assume that they had no real intention of modernising anything.

Prior to voting day Louis and I went off on tours of the villages in a wide area to see how the unfortunate serf was reacting to the greatest event in the nation's history, the election of her first free parliament. Syrian roads are few and poor : the average English county has more road miles than all Syria. To reach villages you have to travel over miles of dusty, stony and rocky tracks, many of which have served for centuries as caravan routes. We penetrated into maize, cotton-growing and vineyard country. Clouds of track dust rolled up behind us, whilst a torrid sun beat down mercilessly from a white, leaden sky. In spite of the monotonous and vicious sun, the steppe air was always keen, sparkling and dry. At one village a fight was in progress. Stones were flying through the air, sticks were being brandished, whilst men, women and children were struggling in a confused mass. Our arrival put a stop to the game. We pulled up in a rough open space at the fringe of the jumbled mass of dome-roofed mud shacks. The villagers surged around the vehicle shouting : "Long live Suriya ! Long live Great Britain ! Long live Churchill ! Long live the sergeants !" They then clamoured for cigarettes. A

bearded old man jumped on the running-board, and we asked him what all the fighting had been about. "Some people are for the French, others want independence. So they fight." We were assured that the battle would be resumed after our departure. The moukhtar appeared, and led us to his mud-brick house, relieved that our arrival had prevented ugly developments and caused a truce.

We sat on cushions on rush matting on the floor. The moukhtar, who acted as scribe for his illiterate fellows, was a biblical figure with a biblical countenance, in long robes and a beard. His eyes had a steadfast and resolute expression, and his whole demeanour betrayed resignation and a deep wisdom. He conducted business on behalf of the peasants with visitors and government officials who came to the village. However, his ability as a scribe and an interpreter of documents was negligible, though sufficient for the elementary business he had to conduct. He had the simple notions of the peasants about politics and paradise. He was typical of the class of sedentary peasant whose simple basic philosophy makes him feel scornful of all kinds of book learning. Slowly he put his finger to his temple and said: "When you have brains here you don't need book knowledge." And indeed, he was the wise man of the village, holding the honorary and privileged post of moukhtar. None of his villagers could read or write, and though there were more than 2000 inhabitants, not a single child went to any school. The nearest government school was at Idlib, more than forty kilometres away. Why should boys go all that way to school, learning pernicious ideas from books, when they were far more profitable to their fathers helping to plough the land, sow the wheat and reap the harvests? Schooling was a waste of time.

We heard here, as we had already done elsewhere, that one candidate had been touring villages in the area and paying five lira (about 11s. 6d.) each to the responsible heads of families to be assured of their votes. Though possibly true, we did not readily believe such tales, which were often

made out of spite. We merely listened, and let the accusations pile up. When the stories began to tally — often the only way in which fact could be separated from fiction — then it was time enough to think about placing some credence in them. The villagers were not interested in big politics, and as long as they were left to cultivate their soil in peace they did not care which candidates got elected. When I asked the moukhtar what he thought about the war (a very silly question), he answered in his simple naïve way : “ Good. England will win. Wallahi, Inghilterra kuwayyis, kuwayyis ketir ” (“ England is fine, very fine ”). He was not quite sure who was at war with whom, apart from the usual Anglo-German antagonists, but since England was the friend of the Arabs she was bound to be the victor. And after England had won she would have plenty of loot and riches, as is the custom with victors, and would give some of it to the poor Arabs in recognition of their friendship and assistance. He said nothing about the French until we asked him, and then he described them as “ mush kuwayyis ” (“ no good ”), hoping that the British would throw them out of Syria.

“ But,” I said, “ you will still vote for the pro-French candidate if he pays a good price for your vote.”

His philosophy was profound. “ The acceptance of a little present, a little baksheesh, will not alter the wish of Allah. If Allah wants the French to remain in Syria, they will remain. If He wants them to go, they will go. It is not for me to decide these things.” This resigned attitude was representative of the whole peasantry.

There were many independent reports of heavy spending by some candidates, who apparently were regarding their election costs as an investment. At one village alone one candidate spent 1300 lira (about £150) buying the votes of the peasants. Back at Idlib the candidates were accusing one another of bribing the peasants for votes. One did not have to see the actual pay-out to believe the repeated statements and accusations. There was not the slightest doubt

about the way some rich candidates were conducting the election campaign. However, it was none of our business.

Feeling ran high between the various Idlib clans and factions. Two weeks after the first election a second scrutiny took place to decide which three candidates should go to Damascus as deputies. There was another orgy of spending and mud-flinging. The final results were announced. There were quarrels and much discontent. The fourth man on the list was, of course, out of it, having seven votes fewer than the third elected candidate. Number four, had the wangle worked, should have become a deputy. He intervened with the Caimacam, a personal friend of his. As a result, the third of the elected candidates was summoned by the Caimacam, who, using his prerogative, "fined" him eight votes because his name was wrongly spelled on a voting list. The eight-votes fine was deducted from his total, and he thus went down to fourth place, his place as a deputy being after all given to the Caimacam's friend. Rumours were plentiful, some of them giving the precise figure of the bribe the Caimacam had received to cook the final voting figures. I had no idea of what actually did happen. I merely went about with eyes and ears open, and plenty of questions on my tongue. I saw tangibly little, but I heard much.

The trickiest problem of the whole election was, of course, the total illiteracy of the peasants, not one of whom could read the ballot paper. How were they to identify the names of the candidates? Even when they knew the names they had no idea for what they were voting. They did not care much. It was all a huge joke, a droll sort of game. But their small country now has a voting power at U.N. equal to that of Britain, certainly an achievement in this competitive world. Only one candidate, a good friend of ours, was really progressive. He fought the campaign cleanly and got elected. His integrity and personality were outstanding.

## CHAPTER VI

### NEJIB THE FEUDALIST

IF you see a young man in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs or Hama wearing sun helmet, light sports jacket, jodhpurs and riding-boots you can be sure that his father owns villages. The son of the feudal landlord stands out a mile ; you cannot mistake him. He attends the American University or the French Jesuit College at Beirut, learns French or English, or both, and having spent a few student years of dissipation in the night life and brothels of the Lebanese capital he returns home with a thin veneer of culture, ready to manage his father's estate and keep the serfs down where they belong. Nejib was such a young man. His family lived in Aleppo, and owned a village deep out in the steppes, south of the Jebel Samaan, on the fringe of malarious swamps. Nejib spent the whole summer at the village. He was genuinely glad to see us on our fortnightly tour, when we included his village in our rounds. The village was remote ; we could only find our way over the tracks of the treeless steppe by using maps. We always made for a low ridge of rising ground, from the summit of which a vast new vista of steppes opened up. Far away, dancing in the heat haze, was a patch of green swamp and a tell, and behind the tell was Nejib's village.

Nejib's look-out men warned him always of our approach, betrayed by a high column of dust. When we arrived he would be all smiles, goodwill, ostentation and pride, without a speck of dust on his brown riding boots. By comparison, Louis and I, covered in red dust, looked like tramps. Nejib would snap orders to his peasants, probably to impress us with his power over them.

The village presented a scene closely resembling a very large and very dirty English farmyard, covered in straw, manure, litter of all kinds, encumbered with mud-brick shacks without windows, some without shutters, with straw and reeds stuffed into holes in walls and roofs, some with crude wooden doors, and some without. The shacks had dome-shaped roofs, which showed signs of crumbling and imminent collapse. Nejib was never keen for us to linger near the shacks. He blamed the heavy rains of the past winter for their condition. "You see," he would say, "in normal winters the mud roofs can absorb the rain, but sometimes it rains too fast, and there is much damage. The roofs fall in. Ma'a'leesh" ("Never mind"). A few bearded, ragged men would be sifting wheat with hand sieves; and women with dirty matted hair, without veils over their brown, withering, lined faces, and dressed in grubby blue ankle-length robes, would be carrying pots of water on their heads, or squatting on their haunches kneading camel dung, mud, straw and water with their hands, making fuel patties for the fires. Then there were urchins of all ages, every one of them with matter oozing from sores in the eyes, with black clusters of flies feeding on the sores. Most of the boys had shaven heads, with a long fringe coming down over the forehead, which Nejib attributed to "fashion". He knew no other reason for the masculine fringe. The urchins would gather round and stare heartily at us, occasionally using the back of a hand to brush away the hungry flies feeding on their running eyes.

The vegetable gardens, containing red and green pimenteroes, tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers, lettuce and onions, were amongst the swamps, and were irrigated, not by swamp water, but by the water from a chain-bucket well. A blindfolded mule, with open sores at four places where the harness pole and rope chafed its hide, walked round and round the small circle, working the apparatus that drew the water up from the dark cool depths. The mule needed no

coaxing or whipping. When blindfolded, the mule plods on and on without complaint or faltering. Eventually it must drop dead, rotten with sores. Yellow tortoises would scuttle from under our feet in the long grass, as we stumbled over the rough ground, and dive into the swamp water.

I was always glad to get into Nejib's cool stone house, a welcome escape from the sun glare and the dry parching gale laden with fine red dust. The gale blew daily for months on end, and seemed to wither the soul with its oven-like heat. By comparison with the mud shacks, the stone house was almost a mansion. There were olive and fig trees in its mud courtyard, the only trees in the whole plain. "Moya ! Sabon !" Nejib would shout to a servant as we stood on the doorstep. Then he would pour a dribble of water from a small can with a small spout, and Louis and I would wash. "God, I could do with a hot bath," I would say in English to Louis. "You'll be lucky to get one this side of Christmas," he would retort. I did actually get one some six months later in a Jewish hotel in Tel Aviv. There was plenty of good washing water in the well, but Nejib's trouble was his little pint watering-can. We were always obliged to drink the well-water, but since little wriggly red leeches were inevitably swimming in it, we always added plenty of arak to it. Arak alcohol kills all living matter in water, though it fails to quench a violent thirst.

Lunch was either chicken or turkey, supported by a vast variety of dishes, such as aubergines stuffed with rice, stuffed vine leaves, raw cold kubbé, bourghoul, eggs fried in butter, soup and platefuls of hot pimentoes, raw tomatoes and onions and succulent slices of melon. Nejib, during his lavish lunches, was often wishing me to the devil, for by persistent questioning I learned all I wanted to know about the life of the feudal serf under the *métayage* system. Under this system the peasants normally retain, in theory, from 30 to 50 per cent of the crops they produce after the landlord has paid the land-tax. This, if paid, is paid with wheat.

There were about thirty families in the village. To each family Nejib's father paid an annual sum of 120 lira (about £13 : 10s.); in addition, he gave each family two sacks of wheat, canvas footwear and some vegetables. The crumbling mud-brick shacks, Nejib pointed out largely, were rent-free. I asked Nejib what a whole family could do with £13 : 10s. a year. He said it was enough to buy essential clothing, and they had no need of anything else. "When the harvest is over," said Nejib, "we allow some of the men to go to town to replace the family clothing. They don't know how to look after their clothes." We learned that the peasants stole much of the wheat they cultivated and harvested, and buried it in the soil for winter use. "So you see," explained our host, "they really have plenty to eat, with the two sacks per family we give them, the wheat they steal, the vegetables we give them and the poultry they rear. And twice a year, at Ramadan and Bairam, they eat sheep-meat."

I asked how the villagers fared during the severe winters, when the steppe was a quagmire swept by icy gales roaring down from the mountains through their draughty shacks. "Well," said Nejib, "they don't go out much in the winter. They sit all day round fires in their houses. They collect brushwood and sticks in the autumn, and make fire-cakes from manure. To get from house to house they walk on kub-kubs, a shoe on wooden blocks, to keep their feet out of the mud." Nejib was equally frank about village health. The place had never seen a doctor. Every peasant was a chronic malarial sufferer, and more than half the children died before they reached the age of five years. If any peasant fell ill with internal pains or foaming at the mouth, nature took its course, and the peasant lived or died, according to his general condition and powers of resistance. All the village ills were ascribed by Nejib to the will of Allah. He never went near the place during the winter, when the peasants were totally abandoned to their fate, ignored by employer, government and doctors alike.

The villagers were employed by Nejib's father on a year-to-year contract. They could leave, if they wished, at the end of the year, but as Nejib truly pointed out, where would they go if they left? No other village would take them in, and living in a town would mean starvation. The "contract" was a document to safeguard the feudal employer, lest the peasants should happen to walk out on him and leave the harvest unfinished. The village moukhtar's finger-print on the contract was sufficient to bind all the peasants; none could read the document, though in a court of law it was understood that they all subscribed to it by virtue of the headman's finger-print.

The harvesting methods were as primitive as everything else about the place. The wheat is threshed by a wooden roller fitted with circular toothed blades which cut the stalks. It is drawn round and round in a small circle by a horse or mule. A boy sits on a seat above the thick wooden roller and keeps the animal moving. It takes a whole day by this method to thresh a single ton of wheat. When the corn stalks are at last finely chopped up, peasants with pitchforks throw them into the air. The constant gale of wind blows away all the chaff, and the grains of wheat fall back into the pile. The process goes on until no more chaff is left. Then the women sift the grain with wooden hand sieves. The corn is cut and brought in at the end of May, and not until mid-September is the wheat finally ready for packing into sacks. It was Nejib's opinion that the peasants would revolt against the use of machinery to speed up the harvest. Nor was he himself ripe for progressive change. Koranic law forbids any kind of change in the methods or in the ways of life of the Moslem. One may as well expect industrial workers to produce motor-cars without machines as to expect Arabs to reap the harvest with them.

I subsequently met Nejib in Aleppo, where he spent the winter. The village was no place for him then, when icy blasts and drenching rain made the place one of utter desola-

tion and misery. I later saw only too often, during three winters in the Levant states, the dreadful conditions the peasants have to endure during the cold months. For two winters I lived in Arab villages amongst the wretched peasants, and learned from the experience that they would be better dead. Nejib himself spent a small fortune amusing himself in the oriental cabarets (arak-drinking taverns) and the westernised night dives of Aleppo. In these places platinum blonde Hungarian, Polish and Greek hostesses and female "refugees" from Hitler Europe lapped up the whisky he bought for them at fifteen shillings a nip. He had only a veneer of education and culture, he was too indolent to read a book of any kind, and as far as I could gather from my frequent contacts with him, when he was not fast asleep beneath silk eiderdowns, he was café-crawling with the young feudal *élite* of Aleppo, young peas from the same feudal pods. Any winter midday you could see him with a small crowd of his own kind at Palanjian's, Winrice's or the Ritz Bar. It was much more difficult to find him at night; if he was not in one of his usual cabarets you could make a pretty accurate guess.

Nejib is representative of the spirit of the New Republican Syria. There may be 5000 of his kind. They are the government, the authority, the ruling power in the country. Syria's two million or more peasants depend on them for their very existence, but for nothing else, for they have nothing else but a precarious existence and a living death. Thanks to Nejib's class the frightful conditions of living and health left behind by the Turks still persist.

## CHAPTER VII

### CIRCUMCISION FEAST

THE village of Tafiss, a few miles from Idlib, was like all others in North Syria, except that the moukhtar was particularly friendly. He supplied us with the best honey in the country. He sent it along in large sticky masses, honey-comb and all. In return we kept him supplied with quinine pills for the use of his friends. Furthermore, his generosity extended to sumptuous meals and offers of pretty Bedouin girls to keep house for us. When he fell sick with malarial fever he would spread the tale that we took him to an Idlib doctor, paid for the injections and took him back home again. All we ever did was to give him some pills. And when a triple circumcision event took place, Louis and I were informed that we were to be the guests of honour. We went, especially as another crowd of picturesque Bedouins had arrived to camp outside the village and were to provide some of the entertainment.

Three sons of a village notable were to be circumcised and the feasting was to last three days. Our attendance would make all the other fathers of sons mad with envy, for our presence at such an event would be talked about for years. It was a great occasion in the annals of the village. The whole place was in festive mood when we arrived, and for the first time pretty girls and women were laughing, and as village women do not wear the veil, their laughing features were a happy sight for our hungry eyes. At Idlib the only woman's face we ever saw was Umm Fawzi's. We were taken to the happy home, where the large upstairs room was carpeted and decorated with what I suspected to be borrowed materials. Louis and I sat at the end of the room, floundering

amongst masses of cushions on the floor. All the family heads crowded in and squatted round the walls, after shaking hands with us. A full hour passed before two boys, aged about 12 and five years (the father did not know their exact age), were brought in and paraded before the assembly. The infant was to be circumcised downstairs in the kitchen, since his mother was not allowed upstairs with the men. The eldest son sat on a cushion while his father placed a family heirloom on his head. It was a kind of gilded coronet with gold fittings and gold Turkish pounds jingling from it. A quack doctor from a neighbouring village eventually arrived, squatted on the floor in the middle of the room, and took his paraphernalia from an old leather case. For five minutes he sat sharpening an old cut-throat razor. He also had a rusty clamp, a flagon of antiseptic fluid, some cotton wool and torn strips of clean rag.

The eldest boy regarded the ceremony as a joke, but the younger lad howled incessantly, and had to be held down by four of the guests. The quack doctor did not utter a word throughout the brief but crudely conducted operations. Within a few minutes there appeared what all the guests had really come for. Four men were struggling up the outside staircase with a large circular silver platter loaded with a roasted sheep laid on a foundation of cooked rice and bourghoul. The sheep had been conveniently broken up and stripped of the larger bones. Raw onions, tomatoes, red pimentoes and bowls of lebn garnished the platter. As soon as the crowd gathered round the dish placed on the floor, the eating began, and I was near enough to make a grab for the ribs, or cutlets. I had intended to take only one, but half a dozen came away in my hand, so I was rather fortunate. Hands dug into the sheep from all sides, and presently there was much laughter and gaiety and belching, many of the guests competing to make the loudest belching noises. There was riotous laughter, for it was a happy occasion, and it was a welcome change to see Arabs laugh. It was a rare sight.

An hour later we filed out of the room, washed our greasy hands downstairs and found the quack doctor collecting his fees from the guests. We all gave him the equivalent of half a crown. We went to the moukhtar's house, and no sooner did we arrive there than his wife brought in a Bedouin girl who had come to seek the moukhtar's protection. The girl said that her father was trying to marry her to a man of about 55, and to escape marrying him she had run away from the camp, which was on the outskirts of the village. The moukhtar made her parade around the room in front of all the men. She was about 16, and well developed. There were blue tattoo marks on the backs of her hands and on her pretty face, but they did not detract from her beauty. Her teeth when she smiled, which she did frequently, were perfect, and white as snow, contrasting vividly with her dusky skin. She said her name was Najoua, but did not know her age. "But I'm old enough to marry," she added.

The moukhtar asked us if we wanted a pretty capable maid to keep house for us. I looked at Louis, who said : "Dammit, we can't have her in the room." I agreed, but I said we might get to the bottom of the affair, and have a look at the prospective husband. We asked to see the people concerned, and in a few minutes several Bedouins trooped in. Among them was another girl, by no means so pretty as Najoua. She was called Leila. Abu Ahmed, who coveted Najoua, looked at least 55. We asked her if she was sure she did not want to marry him. "I'm sure I don't. He's already married eight times."

"Do you want to marry anyone at all ? "

She looked at a Bedouin youth who had come in with the others, dropped her eyes to the ground and said, "Him."

"Him" was the old man's son. His long hair was in curls at the temples, and he looked robust and healthy. It had been arranged that Najoua should marry old Abu Ahmed, and in exchange his daughter Leila was to marry Najoua's brother. But the pretty Najoua quite naturally preferred to

marry Abu Ahmed's son. The moukhtar insisted on this, that sister and brother should marry brother and sister. The only complication in this exchange was that Najoua's father demanded two new wheat sieves in compensation for her good looks. Najoua would be a fair exchange for Leila if the latter were pretty, but she was not. She was very plain. Abu Ahmed thus not only lost the pretty Najoua, but he had to pay two new wheat sieves to satisfy her father. When the Bedouins had gone the moukhtar said he was angry with us for having refused his offer to give us Najoua. " You are always turning down the pretty little Bedouin girls I offer you. I'm sure you'd be very satisfied with a pretty Arab houri in your house."

At night the whole village gathered in front of the Bedouin encampment where tall poles with brilliant pressure lamps had been fixed. All the night through there were Arab warrior and sword dances, music and songs. A professional dancing-girl from the neighbouring village did several dances, and though her efforts were not exactly professional, her languorous hip and arm movements met with the gusty approval of the villagers. Najoua and four other Bedouin girls sang desert love-songs, songs of the love and romance that they themselves would never taste. Before we left at dawn, Louis and I were treated to a special sword dance of welcome and goodwill, to which we answered by emptying our revolvers into the air.

*CHAPTER VIII*

**PROPAGANDA PROBLEM**

AN illiterate and imaginative population falls easily victim to any kind of propaganda. Oriental imagination is extremely fertile and erratic, causing good and bad propaganda to spread rapidly with beneficial or disastrous results to morale. When you meet people who tell you very seriously that the Germans had a secret weapon in the shape of a gun with a barrel 400 metres (1250 feet) long capable of hurling a shell weighing 100 tons, the propaganda problem becomes one that needs careful attention. Another secret weapon of the Nazis was a machine that reached out to England, scooped up people and whisked them back to Germany. What can you do with such people? They knew no better. In a civilisation without coal, steel or factories, imagination fills the gaps and creates fantastic machines.

Sometimes we had to work hard to remedy the effects and defects of bad British propaganda. Idlib possessed the only cinema between Aleppo and the Mediterranean, and was thus an important channel for diffusing propaganda to peasants from nearly a thousand villages. When a peasant returned to his village from a visit to Idlib he told wondrous tales of what he had seen — and had not seen — at the cinema. For reasons of prestige Louis and I never went to the cinema unless it was to find a wanted person, and on these occasions we held up the programme, had the lights switched on, did our work and left again. One week two British films on the same programme were announced, to be supplemented by a French war newsreel made in North Africa. It was an event, a gala occasion. Invitations went out to all the leading personalities, and the best box in the house was reserved for

Captain Petitot, Louis and myself. To our dismay the two films turned out to be "Gasbags" and "Pack up your Troubles". We were infuriated at our slackness in not previously finding out the titles of the films. Whoever was responsible for sending these two films to be shown to Arab audiences should have been compelled to sit, like us, and bear the humiliation that befell us that evening. The two films were about the worst that could be produced by the British or any other film industry. One of them showed a barrage balloon anchored to a mobile fish-and-chip booth, and R.A.F. personnel being paraded in their shirts and pants before immaculately dressed Nazi stormtroopers. It was typical music-hall slapstick comedy that might tickle suburban audiences, but few things could more damage our prestige in Arab eyes. Arabs are illiterate. This means that they never see a book or a magazine. Therefore their only knowledge of the outside world comes from hearsay, physical vision and the cinema screen. The simple peasant mind believes what it sees. It is black-and-white evidence. Western comedy has no currency in the East. What is shown on the screen cannot be doubted. The illiterate peasant does not know who makes the films ; he cannot read the advertisement posters or the Arabic sub-titles ; he does not know whether the film is made by the British, the Germans or the Eskimos. Therefore if Nazis dressed up in fine uniforms hold a parade of trouserless R.A.F. personnel and prod them in the back with batons to make the audience roar, then it must have happened, since it was on the screen in black and white. What the eye sees none can dispute or deny.

Next day two Christian Arabs of some education came to us and deplored the disastrous effect that the two films would have — and had already begun to have — on the morale of the town. The audience had roared with laughter, not at the comedy of the film, but at the Germans making a mockery of the R.A.F. After a day or two a large section of the population was cock-a-hoop, and several reports came in to

us that local people now had it confirmed to them that the Germans were the strongest, and the British were weak and decadent. Nothing had a greater effect on the Arab mind than the sight of Europeans — and the almighty English in particular — suffering humiliating indignities. In Arab eyes a European loses dignity and respect merely by carrying his own week-end case through the street. As a result of the films a large section of Idlib morale overnight swung over to a pronounced pro-Nazi tendency. In particular, the half-educated Moslem had shown himself ready once again to follow only the strongest, and to despise the weak. In spite of many Allied set-backs Louis had succeeded in painstakingly building up a pro-Allied morale in the town. It had taken him nearly a year. Then this sort of thing happened.

Much damage had been done. We sensed latent hostility in certain quarters of the town. In the soukhs and the square some people grinned smirks as we passed them by. We talked the matter over and decided on swift action. We told the officer of the *gendarmerie* we wanted half a dozen gendarmes placed at our disposal one night at eight o'clock. We collected them, went to the cinema, stopped the programme, had the lights switched on, closed the exits and searched everybody in the building. We made thirty-eight arrests : they included a couple of Turks. We lined them up outside and marched them through the town under the gendarme escort to the French barracks. Here every one had a summons issued against him for a security offence, though only a minor one. We were not surprised to learn next day that Allied prestige had gone up a little. We also dealt swiftly with a couple of questions that were about due for a quick decision, and we made a meticulous night raid on the "hotels" and khans. The Moslem worships force and decisive action, and though we normally preferred gentler methods, the use of force was sometimes necessary.

Morale normally went up and down like a switchback railway. The Moslem contracts an opinion as he contracts

an illness, and gets sick as a result. The slightest piece of good or bad news, or the spreading of an opinion hitherto not thought of, had a tremendous effect on imagination. I met an educated man in Idlib, schooled at a French college, who was afraid of black fairies ; according to him, you died as soon as you saw a black fairy, whilst a white fairy (ghost) did you no harm. A gendarme, educated at a French school at Damascus, tried to persuade me one day that a vapour trail in the sky was an aeroplane throwing out snow. With such people around us, and these were the educated and instructed ones, we had to weigh every word we said. Many a time my words have been turned and twisted to produce the opposite effect when repeated to a third person, and gained still more inaccuracy as they travelled from mouth to mouth.

Efforts to explain the war to what seemed to be intelligent people failed completely. A schooled man, looking at a large coloured map of the world on the wall of our room, turned to me and asked if it was a map of Syria. When a schooled man does not know what a map is, what do the peasants make of it ? Yet our propaganda people in Cairo were sending up enlarged and detailed maps of obscure war fronts, printed in Arabic, for distribution amongst a type of people who thought a map of the world was a map of Syria. The waste of propaganda paper was appalling, and we tried to give it out only to those who could read, but even many of these regarded the maps and magazines as negotiable baksheesh to sell in the soukhs. When we handed out our magazines, we knew where we could find them the next day : as wrapping paper for peanuts and sticky dates in the shops.

The oriental, accustomed to the sight of a countryside parched brown for seven months of the year, and living in towns and villages that are all white or brown without the relief of a single splash of colour, yearns to feast his eyes on anything coloured. Hence, propaganda paper in rich reds, greens and blues, no matter what the subject depicted, was gratefully accepted by all types of people. A few random

bullets from our revolvers in front of a crowd of townspeople or peasants did more for the Allied cause than all the maps and mags. that came up from Cairo. The simple folk would gather round and admire the weapon, a token of force and strength, asking to be allowed to fire a round. Lawrence won over the Arab countries with hardly a scrap of paper. In the second German war these countries were largely pro-Nazi until Allied victories revealed that we were stronger than the Germans. The Arab peoples had nothing but amusement and contempt for our masses of propaganda paper. We who did our work in the Arab countryside, and knew from experience what was best in the way of propaganda, had no voice in deciding what it should be. Ours was a voice in the Arab wilderness.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE DYING RACE

**S**YRIA is a beautiful country. It is a tourist's paradise and a sportsman's happy hunting-ground, but as both it is totally neglected. The country's assets have run to waste and ruin, and will remain thus, because the population is dying out and the vast spaces are growing year by year ever emptier. There are remote spots set amongst beautiful scenery that are like a ghostly world, practically unpeopled by human beings. Such a spot is the River Orontes rift at the foot of the Alawite Mountains.

Leaving the Aleppo-Hama road about thirty miles north of Hama, the earth track cuts across thirty miles of undulating steppe. To the far limit of vision either side of the rough track stretch miles upon miles of rich red empty soil, covered with loose stones and dried grasses, begging both cultivation and population. In England we would call it a wicked waste. The Zionists, I believe, use a similar term when speaking of the empty spaces of fertile Syria. The soil needs neither irrigation nor fertilisers to produce a rich crop of wheat: a ploughing and a sowing of the seed would suffice. Close to the rift the track runs into rocky ground. On one occasion we were fortunate enough to have a sporting gun and a large supply of cartridges. Suddenly, thousands of small birds came up over the edge of the rift, and the whole sky vibrated with life. In a country where birds are few and scarce the sight of many thousands attracts the attention. We fired two rounds, and more than a score of the birds fluttered to earth. We gathered them up, having been told they were eatable.

The ruins of Apamea, the Seleucid capital in the days of

Greek domination, lie just east of the rift. The physical evidence of past glories lay strewn amongst dried grasses and bushes in neglected splendour. Hundreds of stone and marble columns, wrecked by earthquakes, reposed amongst formidable masses of masonry, courtyards, stone staircases and foundations. Here were the remains of the Seleucid stables for 30,000 horses. A government fully occupied with the problems of governing can be excused for neglecting the wonderful ruins of a rich history, but the Syrian Government seemed less interested in the enormous problems facing it than in the continued presence of the Mandatory Power's representatives. It had plenty of time on its hands to do some cleaning up of its rich heritage of historical ruins.

Passing through the ruins of Apamea one arrived on the cliff looking down into the rift. Standing out of the swamps, and almost a stone's throw from the cliff, was an enormous rock, some 200 feet high, at the top of which was perched a compact village. Vehicles, if their springs are to be preserved, must be left amongst the ruins. You clamber down a precipitous path into the rift, and then up another to the summit of the rock. Qa'alaat Moudiq had been, as its name indicates, a Roman fortress. I don't know how many times we went to this village perched on the summit of a perpendicular rock ; perhaps four or five times, and on each occasion but the first our visit was resented by the half-dozen gendarmes stationed there. The village in area was about the size of a football pitch, some 130 yards by about 100. Crowded into this restricted space, living in mud-brick shacks, was a population of 1700 peasants, every one of them sick and ailing. Alone the Mudir (district officer) made us welcome and did not conceal his delight at receiving guests from the outside world. From his district capital he ruled over an almost empty nahiya, and he was compelled to derive simple happiness that comes from anticipating unexpected visitors and the monthly consignment of cigarettes for the villagers. On one occasion we delivered half a million badly needed

cigarettes to Qa'lat Moudiq ; the *Régie* distributor was a friend of ours and had asked us to help him out by using the truck as a delivery van. The Mudir rightly claimed to be an exile, for he led an existence not unlike that of the up-river commissioner in a British colony. Having little backing from his government he could do little to arrest the certain drift in his area towards race extinction. He sat at the top of his rock and wrote reports to his department at Damascus. He and the gendarmes, who were there to keep order, were the only literate people within fifty miles.

In the middle of the football-pitch village was an open square where chickens scratched for food between the legs of wandering donkeys and camels. Children, barefooted and with flies feeding on the sores of their eyes, chased one another amongst the dung and dirt. The villagers had all the appearance of being the dregs of humanity ; they were listless, pallid, gloomy, hard-faced, untidily clothed and suffering from lack of medical attention. Had I not grown so quickly to be heartless and callous at the sight of suffering, these living corpses might have caused me to weep. They were a distressing sight. But they could, or would, do nothing to help themselves, and were devoid of the minutest sparkle of life. Admittedly there is none in Syria, be it the Government, the literate class or the feudal landlord class, who does a single thing to alleviate the appalling conditions of the peasantry. The task is overwhelming, and this is why it is not tackled ; conditions are too far gone to repair. It is racial extinction at an advanced stage.

One left the village with a sigh of relief and quickly forgot the living graveyard, with its myriads of disease-carrying flies, its foul stench, and its human souls waiting only for death to relieve them of their suffering. The rift valley is twenty miles long and more than two miles wide. The River Orontes meanders through miles of steamy swamps and large pools of crystal-clear water. Three miles' walking along the fiery track at the edge of the swamp brought us to the villagers'

fishing-pools. We joined the villagers who were there, and watched them bring out more than fifty large fish with a single stick of gelignite. The pools were alive with fish and tortoises. The peasants prepared us a feast of grilled fish cooked on an iron grid placed over a fire of camel dung and dried reeds, but we had foolishly come unprepared for a violent thirst. When we asked for water a youth scooped it out of a near-by pool. I swallowed at least a quart of the delicious clear and cool water. It was only when I went to the edge of the same pool to wash my hands that I saw just below the surface the body of a dog in a state of decomposition, with bits of red-grey flesh quivering on the protruding bones.

Out in the middle of the swamps was a compact collection of shacks that invited inspection, so we tramped over the precarious track and rocks that led to them. We found there an enterprising Armenian who paid the peasants in this fishing hamlet a pittance for all the fish they brought in. He sent the fish down the river to a small town whence they were lorried to Aleppo. He told us he made a profit of £40,000 a year, and could double it with more and faster transport. He hastened to tell the peasants that we were not French soldiers. They were, for reasons best known to themselves, anti-French, and not having heard that British troops were in Syria, took us for Frenchmen. They had never seen an Englishman, and only reluctantly accepted us as such. The Armenian gave us a boat and some boys, and we wandered through the swamps shooting down wild duck and trying foolishly to kill large fish with our pistols. From the water and reeds we recovered fifteen wild duck, and had we done our shooting at dusk instead of in the midday sun we would have shot down many more with the same number of cartridges.

The stone and reed shacks were in a deplorable condition, and could hardly be regarded as fit to shelter scrap iron. Yet human souls and bodies lived in them. The death-rate

from malaria alone was higher than the birth-rate, and it was only a question of time before the place would be deserted of human life. Fish and bird life was in prolific abundance, but man was too feeble to survive. The fit live, the unfit succumb ; here, birds and fish were the masters, and man the defeated. The fisher-folk rarely saw cigarettes, and never ate meat or fruit. Compared with these hapless peasants, those up on the rock at Qa'alaat Moudiq had many advantages. I shuddered to imagine how these fisher-folk ever got through the winter when they and their shacks would be exposed to torrential rains and to bitterly cold blasts sweeping down through the valley from the Turkish mountains. It would seem to us that such peasants could only hope for an early release from such an existence. Yet Moslems do not think in this wise, for to end their misery by suicide, or even by migration, does not occur to them. They are resigned and stoical, and stick it out. The privilege of taking one's own life is reserved for the "civilised" peoples of the west. What happens to the Moslem is entirely beyond his power to decide. If Allah wants you to live, you will live; if Allah thinks your time has come, you will die, but not by your own hand.

*CHAPTER X*

THE CIVILISED BEDOUIN

THE simple naïve Bedouin is usually too far away from any populous centre to cause trouble, and few ever came as far west as the Idlib district. A large encampment of semi-sedentary Bedouins did, however, cause us to keep an eye on them. We paid frequent visits to the encampment, which was far from any road. The tribe had bought some land in the malarious swamps in which the little River Kuweik, flowing south from Turkey, loses itself. Here in the swamps Abu Khalil, the Bedouin chieftain, reared camels, cultivated wheat and other crops, including much fruit.

A large Bedouin encampment presents a welcome homely sight to the steppe wanderer. Even the wisps of blue smoke rising from the many cooking fires seem to sharpen the appetite. Women carry urns of water on their heads, children chase one another between the goat-hair tents, and dogs sleeping in the shade bestir themselves to bark savagely at the visitor.

The Bedouins are the finest and freest of all the Arabs. Though nominally Moslems they have little time for orthodox religion ; their women-folk do not wear the veil, and it has happened to me more than once to find myself seated at the same meal platter as the Bedouin and his wife. The manners of the Bedouin are as easy, correct and natural as those of the aristocrat, and though in many ways he is a naïve creature, in some respects he presents himself as worldly wise and mature. Bedouin women have none of the hypocrisy of the village or town Moslem. They conduct themselves with a grace that is surprising amongst people reared in the wide open spaces. The lithe gazelle does not move with easier grace than the young Bedouin woman carrying an urn of water balanced

on her head. Clothed in an ankle-length dress of blue cloth or of dazzling-coloured print, belted at the waist, she walks from the hips, barefooted, with a perfectly upright bearing that suggests the freedom of the animal. As she walks, her shoulders and back remain motionless, while she holds the urn steady with one hand and lets the other swing freely. Her whole life is spent in the wide open steppe or desert, she never sits on a chair or in a vehicle, and wherever she travels she goes afoot. She walks swiftly, yet she never hurries, for time has no meaning for the Bedouin. From birth to death the Bedouin woman lives under the stars and sun, unworried by the complex codes, morals, cares and anxieties of the civilised world. Grey hair and spectacles for the eyes are things one never sees amongst Bedouins. Yet all who have been amongst them must agree that they are a highly civilised people. Their graceful manners, their honesty, their kindness of heart are all of a higher standard than one finds in England.

Sometimes when we arrived at the encampment Abu Khalil was out. We would be shown to his tent, where many of the tribal elders would join us, sitting silently and speechless on the matting. They would sit smoking cigarettes, with a steady gaze in their eyes and a look of nobility on their rugged, bearded, sun-tanned faces. They would look at us with an expressionless glassy eye, betraying nothing of their thoughts, and probably searching in their minds the reasons which had brought us to see their chief.

One day, tired of waiting for Abu Khalil to come back from the desert in his chauffeured Packard, we asked for a couple of horses, and were given two fine animals that had been imported from Saudi Arabia. We wandered off to the far side of the swamps, crossed a few acres cleared of wheat and came to rough, irrigated gardens planted with cotton and vegetables. In the distance we saw what appeared to be large clusters of hashish plants. We dismounted, left the horses with a gardener, and picked our way through the

cotton to the hashish. There was no mistaking it: it was good green hashish, already six feet high, just about ready for cutting and drying.

Drug-taking is the worst evil of the Middle East. The Egyptian Narcotics Bureau, under Lewa Russell Pasha, is run by Britons for the purpose of stamping out drug-taking in Egypt. Hashish, which is a sexual stimulant, is the principal and deadliest drug, and is in such great demand that the price sometimes reaches £1000 a kilogram. All the hashish that finds its way into Egypt comes from the Levant States. The plant must have its roots in well-watered soil, and must have plenty of sun. The main hashish-growing districts are the mountain slopes of central and north Lebanon, especially east of Byblos on the Levant coast, the Alawite mountains of western Syria and swampy districts in many parts of the Syrian steppes. Here in front of us was hashish worth thousands of pounds. We hadn't suspected our good friend Abu Khalil of being a grower.

We returned to the encampment to find Abu Khalil just back in his big black Packard looking ghostly in a thick coating of red steppe dust. He received us with unexcelled friendliness, and had his best mattings and cushions brought for our use. Within a few minutes fine robust, beautiful, tattooed Bedouin women, most of them in their late teens and early twenties, were bringing water in urns on their heads. They tipped the water with ease direct from their heads into a huge earthenware container buried in the soil in the tent: at least fifty gallons were faultlessly poured through the small opening on the floor of the tent, a day's supply for the chief and his guests. A negro servant, well over six feet tall, came and sat in the tent, stoked up the camel-dung fire, and began preparing the coffee. He put the beans in a thick porcelain bowl and beat them rhythmically with a porcelain pestle. Three coffee pots, encrusted with age and smoke, were used to mix and heat up a coffee of excellent fragrance.

Conversation turned to livestock, as it inevitably must

when you are in Bedouin company. Abu Khalil was a large-scale breeder of camels, which he hired out to merchants and villagers. The visitor who approached Abu Khalil's encampment over the hill from the west, as we always did, was rewarded with a magnificent sight as he came down the track towards the swamp. In it, during the hot hours, stood a herd of some 500 or more camels, cooling themselves or drinking. Motor transport in Syria, and no doubt all over the Arab lands, is driving the camel off the roads, but the roads are so few and the tracks still in such poor condition that the camel is far from becoming extinct. Abu Khalil derived great wealth from his camels, for apart from the revenue on those he hired out, he was able to sell a large number every year. He also bred horses, and specialised in thoroughbreds from Saudi Arabia. Every Bedouin youth and boy at the encampment was an accomplished horseman. Few lead healthier lives than the young Bedouin, who scorns learning, who despises the Arab villager and who, alone amongst Arabs, has a sparkle of romance in his heart. Bedouins are men, one hundred per cent men, living a life in the open air without any of the comforts of a civilised life. Yet in themselves they are extremely civilised. They are courteous, polite and correct to an extent we do not know in England, and it is to their credit that their superb manners and graciousness are genuine and entirely without sham or sophistication. Many an Arab and many a Bedouin have made me welcome and given me a bed in circumstances that at home in my own country would see me standing on the doorstep and the door slammed in my face. The best that I could expect in England would be a frigid lie to the effect that there was no bed free. The Bedouin makes his own bed available if there is no other. The attitude of the average Englishman to his own relatives, to friends and strangers alike is one of uncouth indifference. For civility and unselfishness, for kindness of heart and sound character, give me the Bedouin every time.

In politics as in many other things the Bedouins are extremely naïve and simple. The Bedouins of Syria have their own deputies in the Damascus Parliament, but they have no voice in matters beyond tribal affairs and policy. The larger tribes, like the Fedaa, Beni-Khaled, Baraq, Ageidat and Shammar, most of them numbering up to 30,000 members, and roaming the steppes of east Syria, are always at war amongst themselves, but small groups, like Abu Khalil's, numbering less than 1000, have little to do with the larger tribes. The latter always caused much trouble to the French *Mouvance Bédouine*, under whose control they came, and now that the French have left Syria, the new independent government will have a permanent headache trying to control the Bedouins. Throughout the world war the big tribes of eastern Syria have been fighting amongst themselves. The Bedouins' only sport is inter-tribal sheep-raiding expeditions and family feuds which are often caused by the kidnapping of some pretty Bedouin girl. The Bedouin is a lad to whom the law of the country means precisely nothing : he respects only the unwritten law of the tribe.

Our visit was the occasion to slaughter a sheep, which was brought in on the usual enormous silver platter, garnished with rice, lebn, raw onions, tomatoes and bowls of soup. There were, of course, no table utensils or serviettes. Louis and I decided to say nothing about the hashish ; there was nothing to be done except return a few days later with a destruction party. To bring the matter up, before we could destroy the plants, would only result in their being cut down and hidden.

Before the sheep was stripped of its best meat and the platter handed over to lesser tribesmen to plunge their hands into it and finish it off, another huge platter containing about a hundredweight of grapes and melon slices was brought in. The fruit itself was almost invisible. There were not hundreds, but thousands of flies crawling in a black swarm all over the fruit. It no longer seemed appetising, and my thirst

for some luscious fruit had gone. I eventually solved the problem in part by pulling bunches of grapes from underneath, though the flies swarmed on to them before I got the grapes into my mouth.

Abu Khalil's hospitality exceeded that of the feudal landlord, due not so much to his wealth as to the Bedouin's desire for company and sociability. By the unwritten rule of the desert the Bedouin must provide food and drink for his wandering fellow Bedouin. At night food and water are always placed in the tent nearest the caravan track, so that the night traveller can walk in and help himself should he have the need. The Bedouin entertains without stint or ulterior motive. The best of his food is offered to his guest, with the sincerest apologies for its modesty and poor quality, though it may be the tenderest of roast chicken or turkey. The guest, if he requires transport, is offered the best horse in the encampment, and if he honours the tribal chief with his company at the camp-fire at night, he is expected to accept the best mattress, sheets and eiderdowns that can be found.

The Bedouin is almost entirely self-supporting. Allah sends winter rains to provide sparse grass in the spring for his sheep and goats, and for the rest of the year he migrates to a place where spring or swamp water fosters some coarse vegetation. His livestock provides him with meat, butter, lebn and cheese for his food, with wool and hides for his clothing, and with goat-hair for his tent covering. Once a year he may go to town and sell a few sheep or camels, and with the cash spend a day in the soukhs, buying clothing, cooking utensils, rifle ammunition and other articles which he may need, such as spoons, knives, coffee cups, a stock of coffee, gaudy and flowery print dresses for his women-folk, light footwear, and, of course, his agal and keffieh to put on his head.

The Bedouin lives by instinct, for he does not know what ambition is. He expects nothing more than the food and water to keep him alive, and to be left unmolested in his

desert fastness. He practises a way of life very close to communism. Money is not essential, and is rarely used : all his wealth is in his livestock. He is totally illiterate. I have never seen a scrap of any kind of paper in any Bedouin tent, except, of course, in cigarettes. Bedouin weddings are conducted verbally, and are not registered anywhere. This form of marriage is as permanent as any, since a rigid code of unwritten tribal laws is enforced by the chieftain and elders, who maintain a high standard of morality and behaviour amongst their kinsmen.

But the Bedouin is not a useful member of Arab society, and none would miss him if he disappeared. His wants are strictly limited by his barren environment and simple tastes. Though he looks a sturdy fellow, and lives under hard conditions, he is not, by Western standards, a very healthy man. Every Bedouin necessarily suffers from malaria and worms. He can only live where there is water, which inevitably he fouls, even though it be a crystal-clear desert spring. He canalises it and creates stagnant pools, ponds and irrigation channels, all of which become the breeding-ground of the anopheles malaria-carrying mosquito.

The Bedouins of Syria are losing their genuine nomadic character. For the most part they are becoming semi-sedentary. Their ancestors came up from the south, settled in the fertile plains and gradually became a peasant instead of a nomadic people. The remnants of the ancient tribes are in the process of becoming settled peasants. Government influence and economic conditions are hastening the transformation. In another hundred years the great tribes are likely to linger on merely as romantic names.

We returned to Abu Khalil's with a French hashish destruction party, consisting of half a dozen Circassian soldiers, a French security inspector and the Idlib Government agricultural expert. We had met with unexpected difficulties, for the Caimacam had told us that the plant was hemp, and not hashish. We were surprised that he knew of

hemp growing miles away in the open steppe. He insisted on the agricultural expert examining the plant before it was destroyed. We went straight to the hashish plots, avoiding Abu Khalil's encampment. Immediately, the agricultural chemist held whispered conversations with Arabs who were working in the cotton and vegetables. He came back to us with a few leaves of the plant and told us it was not hashish. The female plant was hashish, and the plant growing here was the male plant. It could not be destroyed. We had with us a full description of the hashish plant, with detailed photographs and even dried samples. We compared them with the growing plant, and ordered the soldiers to commence destruction. The job took all day, and we counted more than 4000 six-foot plants. The agricultural chemist had obviously been bribed to prevent the destruction, and he spent the day making all sorts of threats and promising serious consequences. Though the land was the property of Abu Khalil, it had been leased to villagers, and they confessed to growing "hemp" for their own use. We returned that night fully loaded, for we took back five prisoners in addition to the French party. The Syrian courts dealt farcically with the prisoners, letting three off without punishment and sending two to prison for a fortnight.

For days rumours were strong, and one reliable source brought us the information that the Caimacam, reputed to be a hashish addict, had received large presents of butter and cheese from Abu Khalil. Our friendship with Abu Khalil was not impaired by this incident, and the next time we passed his way he was as hospitable as ever. We did learn from the incident that hashish was first grown in that area in 1940, its cultivation being encouraged by German agents, who, by sending the hashish down to Egypt, were hoping to obtain large funds of currency for the Nazi war chest.

CHAPTER XI

## ENTENTE CORDIALE

No two days were alike at Idlib, and each brought its little complications. These were caused not only by malicious and pro-Nazi elements, who sought to drive a wedge between the British and the French, but also by imaginative townspeople who loved a little bit of political scandal and saw no harm in spreading false stories and rumours. They did much to create friction between the two foreign services working in the town. At that time the French still retained control of some of the *intérêts communs* (government services) such as the local army, customs service and the telephone and telegraphs. Agitation against the French was continually growing, and rose to a crescendo on the first independence day, which was declared shortly after the elections, when the feudal lords had usurped the government of the country from the Mandatory Power. This first independence day was marked by a pronounced coolness not only towards Captain Petitot, but also towards Louis and me. The *gendarmerie* informed us, not openly and directly, but through an intermediary, that henceforth the two foreign services in the town had no authority to carry out certain tasks without their permission. This indirect instruction we ignored, since we took our orders only from our own H.Q.

Independence to the Syrians meant, purely and simply, "Out with the French", and though they never said so openly, "Out with the British too". Not a man at Idlib could tell us what Syria was going to do with her independence, apart from vague declarations about modernising agriculture and stamping out malaria. The local people could be excused for showing some exaltation, for the achievement of

independence is an important event in a nation's history, but there was not a politician or a notable who had the foggiest notion of a national policy.

On Independence Day, as at Ramadan and Bairam, it was our duty to call on the Caimacam and all the leading government officials to present our compliments and offer the congratulations of the British Government. Our calls were stiff and formal affairs, and we were everywhere met with either coolness or with a request to make independence real by throwing the French out of the country neck and crop. The Caimacam, in particular, was cool, with his St. Bernard's eyes pathetically reposing on puffy bags, and his mind obviously still harbouring rancour on account of the hashish and other incidents.

More and more we found ourselves in difficulties with the French, with sharp differences of opinion and malicious rumours causing endless friction. We strove hard with Captain Petitot to present a united front to the town and countryside, but busybodies were busy as never before inventing rumours, quarrels and disputes that merely existed on the tongues of the gossips, and for that reason all the more harmful. Then serious trouble broke out in the neighbouring Lebanon, when the French, perhaps unwisely, arrested the Lebanese Cabinet and threw them in gaol. The Syrians took up the anti-French cry, whilst the British-controlled Jaffa radio in Palestine fanned the flames. Every evening at sundown excitement in Idlib rose to fever pitch, and crowds gathered at the local cafés to hear the radio news commentary from Jaffa. The sets were turned on at full blast, so that everyone in the square could hear the Arab announcer at Jaffa slating the French for their policy in the Levant. Louis and I used to attend, our arrival being met with applause by these volatile townspeople, who only happened to like us just then because a British-controlled radio was attacking the French.

Captain Petitot sent urgently for us, and we had a very

frank discussion with him about the anti-French propaganda being put out by Jaffa. He had heard the propaganda himself; we had heard it, and we had seen the effect on the population. He had always impressed upon us his desire for Anglo-French solidarity in the Levant States, and if we had any differences we should not announce them in public. Jaffa radio propaganda was causing a serious split between the English and French. The Arab radio in Berlin and the British radio at Jaffa were putting out identical propaganda, almost word for word. Berlin was as up to date as Jaffa, and Captain Petitot held the opinion that Berlin merely repeated what Jaffa had been saying. We deplored the whole affair as much as he did. He wanted to issue an order forbidding the café owners from using their sets to broadcast any news bulletins at all. We disagreed, because the townspeople would only crowd into the five large private houses (including the Caimacam's) where there were receiving sets. Already these houses were open to anyone who wanted to hear every evening what Jaffa radio had to say. Anti-French feeling was running so high that any attempt to prevent listening would rouse tempers still further, and might result in an ugly incident, such as was already taking place in Beirut and Sidon. Captain Petitot finally agreed with us, but he told us he was beginning to have doubts about British policy towards the French in the Levant.

At this time, too, a British army recruiting unit came to Idlib once a week to raise local levies for the British army. Louis and I had received instructions to co-operate, a task we disliked, but orders had to be obeyed. So few of the volunteers were fit for service that it affected very little the normal French recruitment for their Levant army. One day the British medical officers rejected 23 out of 24 volunteers, and on another occasion they accepted only five out of 43. The rejects were all chronic sufferers from malaria. The French army would enlist any man in possession of his limbs and oriental faculties. Nevertheless, the French felt we were

poaching on their preserves, and these recruiting visits did more harm than good.

The periodical German parachutist scares came as a relief, for they compelled the French and British to work together as a single team. They then worked side by side, twenty-four hours a day, for days or weeks on end until all the parachutists had been rounded up. But afterwards the old petty antagonisms came up again, fostered by local people, and by the French Vichyist leavings still sitting on their old Pétainist jobs. Syrian officials, even those who were working for the French, came to us accusing French officers in the region of the Turkish frontier of being involved in smuggling and arms rackets, or reporting on the presence in neighbouring villages of young Lebanese women spreading French propaganda. Or they would tell us that the French were enlisting Syrians to go and fight in the liberation of France. When we heard these tales we wondered what they had been telling the French about us.

Syrian anti-French propaganda was not without humour. An acquaintance of ours showed us a street in the small town of Maaret Nomaan, near Hama, which bore the name of a Frenchman called Hauteclocque. This gentleman apparently was secretary back in 1930 to the French High Commissioner in Beirut ; he was a minor official. During a visit to Maaret Nomaan, Hauteclocque had apparently requested that the Municipal Council name a street after him. When I asked our friend what services Hauteclocque had rendered to Syria or to the town to merit such an honour, he replied : " What did he do ? What did he do ? Why, he gave his name to that street."

Not only Syrian officials, but Syrians working for the French, watched and reported on our movements. Moukh-tars in remote villages reported our passage, and named the people whom we had visited. We sometimes disappeared from Idlib for two or three days at a time, calling on our colleague at Harim on the Turkish frontier, kipping down

for a night in any handy village, paying a visit to a lonely R.A.F. listening-post up in the mountains, or having a snoop in the vicinity of the frontier. Or we would be having a day or two off, picnicking in the Jebel Arbaine, visiting Roman gardens and wine-presses hewn out of rock ; we may have gone for a drive and a tramp to explore ancient ruins, or to climb a hill to obtain a view over vast panoramas of steppe. At Idlib these outings gave rise to much speculation ; we found we had been out on anti-French propaganda tours, visiting places where feeling was violent against the French, and even running one or two private rackets, such as smuggling. The townspeople could not imagine our going off on a trip without some profitable motive. When we came back from such trips we were met with curious raising of eyebrows and questions, and when we said we had been fishing or visiting old ruins, a wry smile would come over the questioner's lips. Hardly an official or a notable at Idlib had a clean pair of hands, so it was naturally assumed that we did not waste petrol for nothing.

## CHAPTER XII

### ARAB METROPOLIS

A TURKISH official said to me one day, "Alexandretta was our fiancée, and she came back to Turkey. But we are already married to Aleppo." Turkey, it was openly said, covets this city. During my long period in North Syria I learned from several Turkish sources that propaganda for the annexation of Aleppo and a third of Syria was being quietly fostered in Turkey. To most Turks Aleppo is a glittering jewel that has fallen out of reach, but can be gathered up again with only little effort. When, after leaving Idlib, I went to work on the Istanbul-Baghdad railway, many a Turk told me that Aleppo was the finest and largest town on the whole line, Istanbul only excepted. It is true.

None knows the exact population of this teeming city : it is probably in the neighbourhood of 400,000. There are 100,000 Armenians, nearly 100,000 Christian Arabs of many denominations, 25,000 oriental Jews, whilst the rest are Moslems of various sects. Aleppo is the fourth city in the whole Middle East, ranking after Cairo, Alexandria and Tel Aviv-Jaffa. It is also the most remote from Western influences, the most oriental, the most Arab, and after Cairo the largest Christian city of the Middle East. It turns its back on the west, and looks eastwards across the vast steppe towards Iraq and Iran. For countless centuries it was a terminal point on the great caravan routes from the east. It is, even more so than Damascus, the metropolis of the Bedouin, who finds his way through the eighteen-mile maze of covered-in soukhs as easily as a taxi-driver finds his way around London. Only Tel Aviv is more crowded than Aleppo.

There are two Jewish quarters in Aleppo, the poorer Bahsita quarter and part of the rich Jemiliya quarter, which is also Christian. Every week saw dramatic incidents in these two quarters. Jewish children, it was alleged, were being kidnapped, cajoled, incited or in other ways whisked away from their parents and transported to the Promised Land way down south. Zionism acts decisively, swiftly and resolutely, not only in Palestine, but all over the Middle East. It lays its impelling hand outside Palestine on Jew and land alike. But more about Zionism later.

Aleppo has two or three Christian quarters, the largest of which is new, and full of magnificent blocks of flats in stone of a light cream shade, flanking broad avenues and streets. The architecture is typically Aleppine, and you find it nowhere else. It is not in the tradition of fine Moslem architecture. The old Moslem and Christian town resembles all oriental towns in that the streets are tortuous and narrow, the houses low, small, flat-roofed and rectangular, the private courtyards (*patios*) walled-in from the street, secluded and leafy, whilst the smells and litter in the unwashed summer streets are such as you find anywhere else, except in Egypt, where they are worse.

Aleppo is surrounded by low, barren, rocky hills. For six months, from mid-April to mid-October, not a cloud smudges the white leaden sky. For six months a merciless sun beats down fiercely and with a dazzling glare, which is intensified by its reflection from the white buildings. But the air is so dry and bracing that the oven-like heat is not oppressive, and if you get a throbbing headache it is because you have been walking about without darkened sun-glasses. The brief autumn is like our English summer, heavy showers giving way to hot sunshine and cool sparkling breezes. The winter is much more severe and shorter than in England, so that, all in all, it possesses as fine a climate as one could wish to live in.

After Damascus, Aleppo claims to be the oldest place in

the world that has been continuously inhabited. It has 4000 years of history behind it. Abraham, the Bible Bedouin, sojourned there. Arabs and Jews both claim descent from Abraham, the former through his son Ishmael, the latter through his son Isaac. Aleppo has been a cradle of both these branches of the Semitic race. It has also been a cradle of Christianity, and to-day something like a score of Christian denominations have a church in the town. Amongst the Christians there are Chaldeans, Assyrians, Maronite Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Syrian Protestants, Syrian Catholics, Nestorians, Armenian Catholics and Armenian Protestants. Few towns are populated with such a variety of oriental creeds and races, and in addition to the Christians there are colonies of Yezidis, Kurds, Circassians, Shia Moslems, Ismaili Moslems and Sunni Moslems.

Aleppo is ugly and old, and has atmosphere. Christian and Jewish Aleppo takes its *apéritif* in the cool of early evening, and promenading throngs, Christian, Moslem and Jewish, saunter up and down the Boulevard de France and the Avenue Gouraud in the old Christian quarter. In the cool of evening, just after the setting of the oriental sun, the clarity of the atmosphere reflects the colours of the western sky on Aleppo's white buildings. The town becomes enshrouded in a rosycream hue, which turns to blue and purple as the rapid twilight sets in. More beautiful than all the colours are the Christian Arab girls, with Parisian coiffures, hatless and stockingless, in light summer frocks, sauntering in small groups along these two promenades. Here and there you also see groups of equally beautiful Aleppine Jewesses, as shapely as, though perhaps a little darker than their Arab sisters. Nowhere in Europe, or elsewhere in the Orient, have I seen such a display of feminine beauty as in Aleppo. These oriental women walk with a superb gait and carriage that make English and European women look like cripples. And though the young women are unusually beautiful, they are naïve and simple, happy and gay in a quiet way, and they

indulge in the simplest tastes. The West has scarcely touched them, except in their dress and coiffure. It was fashionable amongst them to speak French and, latterly, English as well ; they may have gone through Shakespeare and the greater French masters of literature, but they have no solid background of Western culture. There is only a thin veneer.

I have none but the happiest memories of Aleppo. Three or four homes were always open to me, homes into which I could walk for a meal or a bed whenever I arrived in town, morning, afternoon or night. A light-hearted and buoyant gaiety pervades Aleppine Christian circles, and produces a degree of friendly hospitality that must be hard to exceed anywhere. One family in particular regarded me as one of themselves on my very first visit to them. I forget the actual circumstances of my introduction to them, but their friendliness was simple, direct, without fuss, and it was meant. They considered it was their duty to let me have the use of their home, to share with me their company and their food, inadequate as these things were. They were not wealthy people. The father was a civil servant, and lived with his wife and four children in a modest apartment close to the Maronite Cathedral in the old Christian quarter. Downstairs was an open courtyard, tiled with shining blue and cream tiles, with a fountain of water playing under a huge vine from which hung bunches of luscious grapes. There were two daughters, Farida, aged about 18, and Sohanne, the most beautiful and charming of all Arab children, aged 15. There was also a son of 16 and an adopted Moslem boy who had been taken in by this Christian family after being ill-treated by his own parents. In this family I became an elder brother, and was treated as such, without favours or fuss. I could do little to show my gratitude, except to help the children along with their English lessons. An odd hour of practical instruction helped them to become rapidly proficient in conversational English. The family were refugees from Turkish persecution, having been chased

from Alexandretta during the Turkish rape in 1939. Their way of life was simple, and though they rarely went to the cinema or café, they knew a happiness of which we in England only dream about. I sometimes joined them in "doing the rounds" of their friends, visiting four or five families in the course of an evening. These joyous expeditions would always be radiant with family gaiety, good humour, full of hearty gusto and laughter without restraint. The seating accommodation would be in short supply, for in nearly every home there would already be other visitors on a similar kind of tour. Conversation was the only amusement. Cards, tric-trac and other games were unnecessary, and though there would be tea or coffee, there was rarely food. Up to an hour in each house made the happy routine an invigorating experience. Amongst Arabs, highbrows and their antagonists the lowbrows do not exist, and conversation never rises to academics. Instead, it covers the vast field of current affairs, family matters, schooling, gossip and news of friends and relatives, and the philosophy of simple living. These people were, literally, good Christians, perfect Christians. The small simple things of life mean much to the Christian Arabs; these happy, unaffected folk were not the victims of the canned musical entertainment and theatrical variety that are inflicted on the population of Britain, and which Britons cannot now do without. I found none of that horrible repression, that stilted form of polite conversation that one finds in "good" society in England. Never did I hear a single nasty word spoken of another in his absence, and never a word of hypocrisy. There was none of that English "niceness" about these people. You knew where you were with them, for they were not false and pretentious, but meant just what they said, and said what they meant. The oriental Christian has a close bond with his kinsmen. They all hang together, help one another, share their joys and troubles, and do not shut themselves up into cliques or turn their homes into castles in which neighbours and strangers are not welcome.

Aleppo is probably the most picturesque town in the Middle East. It carries a floating population of many thousands of sedentary Arab peasants and Bedouins in from the steppes, and in addition there are many Kurdish mountaineers, Circassians and various minor types. All of them are dressed in their coloured robes and picturesque head-wear. In the course of a ten-minute stroll in the famous soukhs you will see Bedouin men and women from half a dozen well-known tribes. Tanned by the sun and bearded, in coloured keffieh, flowing robes and sandals, with a knife stuck carelessly in his belt sash and perhaps sometimes carrying his rifle, the Bedouin presents a fine sight. Unlike the town and village Arab, the Bedouin often takes his wife or one of his womenfolk to town with him, though she may walk a pace or two behind her lord and master. The Bedouin's visits to town are brief, for the call of the wild is strong in his soul, but so long as he is there he is noticeable by his robust and sturdy build, by his cheerful countenance, by his air of superiority, and his scorn for the town Arab, whom he loathes and despises.

Old Aleppo, especially the old Christian quarter, as oriental as Baghdad, has delightful corners and heavenly retreats, where the old stone masonry wears the crust of centuries, where green foliage and sparkling fountains in secluded *patios* temper the dry heat. The old Christian quarter steps straight out of Omar Khayyám. When I first went to Aleppo I looked in vain for the leafy courtyards, the quiet retreats, the creeping trellised vines and the perfume of flowers that all combine to produce some of the elusive glamour of the Orient. But once I had made friends amongst the Christian Arabs of the town, the doors opened wide and the vision became a reality. Flanking the narrow alleyways are the windowless stone walls that conceal the gardens and the courtyards and the spirit of Omar Khayyám. The vines, the fountains, the flowers, the orange and fig trees, the beautifully tiled courtyards, the filigree stonework and the rare

vignettes of Arab masonried art are all there. I was fortunate in being able to get behind those stone walls, where there existed another world vastly different from that of the sordid streets outside.

With my Arab friends and some of my colleagues I ferreted out a few excellent Arab restaurants, where our favourite dish was always kebab. You selected your own meat, saw it cut up, skewered and placed across the charcoal embers in a neat shallow trough on the marble counter. In five minutes such meat was deliciously grilled. Potatoes and onions were cooked in a pan on a small primus stove, which stood on the marble counter. When everything was ready it was all rolled up in warm khubz (bread) and served on a single dish, from which we would help ourselves. I visited such restaurants in defiance of the Military Provost Out of Bounds order. They were out of bounds because the kitchens were supposed not to be clean enough for the British soldier. Yet I have never seen an Arab restaurant quite as dirty as the kitchens of Naafi garrison restaurants. The vast majority of British soldiers in the Orient, being compelled to eat in dirty Naafi restaurants, never had the opportunity of sampling really good and clean Arab cuisine. The army did everything it could to compel the soldier abroad to live and eat as he does in England, which, for both living and eating, is one of the world's worst countries. With most of my colleagues I was honorary member of the French sergeants' mess in Aleppo, and there, too, we had an occasional meal. The food was well cooked, it was varied, it was served by courteous waiters on spotless table-cloths, and good wines were available. The mess had atmosphere, the food had a soul ; British messes and Naafi food, never.



## Part Two



### CHAPTER XIII

#### A GREY HUT IN THE STEPPES

DURING leave in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem it was a joy to live in Jewish hotels, to step into a hot bath for the first time in about ten months, to sleep between snow-white sheets and to see water running from taps. After this brief interlude I was bundled off urgently to a new job without the opportunity of returning to Idlib even to collect kit and personal effects. These would be sent on later. To leave the little town without saying good-bye to some good friends was an unforgivable insult, and Abu Fawzi would not have believed me had I told him that the army could not spare me a few hours to run down to Idlib to take my farewell. His opinion would have been that it is preferable to disobey or postpone an order than to insult one's genuine friends.

Though twenty-five miles from a road of any kind, buried in open steppe country, Akhterine is on a railway line, the one that goes from Berlin to Baghdad. It was mid-winter, and the camel tracks were bogged with water and mud; not until the late spring would Akhterine be accessible to a vehicle. I drew blankets, a loaf of Naafi bread, tins of milk, a tin of soya links, sugar, tea and paraffin, and lumbered, sack on back, rather like Dick Whittington, to Aleppo station. To find goods train No. 609, standing at "platform" 11, I wandered for half an hour about the marshalling yard, walking round and crawling under groups of trucks, stumbling over the points in the dim-out. A heavy goods train, with a locomotive attached to it, stood on the eleventh track. The trucks were all loaded and sealed box waggons, and reading, with the aid of matches, labels on them marked Khoramshah,

Basra and Mosul, I guessed it was the Akhterine train. A Turkish brakeman, adjusting the cover of an oil-box over a wheel, said, in response to my enquiry for the guard's van, "Evvet, sidi. Fourgon, sheftren." *Sheftren* is the Turkish version of the French *chef de train* (guard). The sheftren sits in a converted box waggon immediately behind the engine, with which, in case of emergency, he can communicate by pulling a rope. This system is understandable only when you get into the routine of travelling by goods trains on a single-track railway where the rolling stock often ceases to roll owing to poor maintenance and where the railway stations are twenty miles apart. Sometimes a heated oil-box set a truck on fire, occasionally a coupling broke and left some trucks behind, and now and again a gust of wind blowing through the door or cracks of the guard's van sent the railway customs documents fluttering out over the Syrian steppe; so the communicating rope between guard and engine-driver was often in use. The engines, too, failed lamentably to perform all the arduous tasks imposed on them, and would stop for lack of steam, a broken piston rod or valve trouble.

As we moved out of the station the sheftren shut the door of the van to keep out some of the icy wind. He was a Turk, who spoke with me in a kind of pidgin French, but conversation was almost impossible owing to the ear-splitting noise in the waggon. A small hurricane lamp cast gloomy shadows about the dark waggon. The sheftren had with him as company one of the train's half-dozen brakemen. They squatted cross-kneed on the floor, spread a small white cloth between them and laid out their supper. They invited me to share their meal but, instead, I lit a cigarette. The engine took in water at Muslimiya, the only station between Aleppo and Akhterine, and in a few minutes we were again well out into the Syrian night. The incessant raging noise sent me to sleep, and only when we began to slow down and the engine to whistle did I wake up. I looked ahead out of the door. In the inky blackness two small lights, probably lanterns, moved,

and a camp-fire burned. We pulled in and stopped. The panting of the engine and a shouting voice were the only sounds that broke the dark silence. There was no platform. One jumped from the waggon down on to the earth. Thus began Akhterine, where I was to live until the next winter in solitary state.

The army's accommodation was less luxurious than at Idlib, my quarters being one-sixth of a Nissen hut. Another sixth was occupied by the Jemadar in charge of the Indian Alwar Infantry platoon who were at my disposal, while the other four-sixths served as the platoon guard-room. My limited space was divided by a partition into living-room and kitchen. I realised how cramped was my living space when a few days later the rain dripped through an inaccessible bullet-hole in the roof on to my bed. No matter which way I arranged the bed, the rain still dripped on it. Every evening the candle continually kept going out, owing to the constant gale of icy wind that blew through the cracks in the door and the sides of the hut. I was forced to borrow a hurricane lamp from the Indians until I devised effective means of stuffing up some of the cracks. One hoped for the gale to cease, but it did not. It blew, apart from about two days a month, for months on end, an icy gale in the winter and a hot gale in the summer. I arrived at Akhterine at the beginning of a particularly cold spell, which lasted, with a break of a few days of rain, for about three weeks. Sleep was impossible, either by day or night, although for warmth I lay on my bed in battle-dress and greatcoat and rolled myself up in eight blankets. There was no fire or effective heating apparatus ; but the lack of night sleep mattered little, since two or three goods trains came in every night from Turkey and had to be attended to. They came in at midnight, at three or five in the morning. One could not grumble at the cold or living conditions ; the men who had to live in fox-holes under constant gunfire at Anzio were the really unfortunate soldiers.

The poor Alwar Indians suffered uncomplainingly from the cold. At night they would huddle round a brazier filled with coal they took from the dump at the station, but owing to the carbon-dioxide fumes they could not take the brazier into their huts. They had never before experienced such cold. The small camp was built in flat treeless country and got the full force of the blast that daily swept unhindered from the mountains of southern Turkey not twenty miles away. The gales were sometimes of hurricane force, and one day a goods train on which I was travelling was brought to a standstill by the wind which struck it diagonally. It had been climbing a slight incline, but could not clear the crest, where it met the full force of the blast.

For reasons of prestige I had to employ and pay a servant. When I found he was incapable of washing my dishes and fetching water from the well, I arranged with the Jemadar for one of his camp followers, a sweeper (one of the untouchable caste) to take over these tasks of Nassim. To air his English, which he spoke with a perfect accent and a wholly inadequate vocabulary, Nassim chattered incessantly. Contact with Australian soldiers in 1941-42 had left him without manners, and, unlike most peasants, he broke into raucous laughter at his own jokes. But if he was a little tedious, at least he was cheerful ; he was also intelligent and crafty. Though his talk was big his ideas were small, and were representative of the peasant-serf stock from which he had sprung. He came from the village of Akhterine, which was a bare mile from the camp and station, and had learned his English from Australian soldiers.

Nassim's discourses on religion were not unlike those I had heard while I was stationed at Idlib. People who do bad things, such as swearing, drinking arak, telling untruths and stealing, will, when they die, be transformed into such sundry articles as matches, pins, stones, cigarettes and pencils. Allah punished bad men in this way, and proved his power in this respect when a man owning a mill got transformed

into a tortoise for refusing to let the wife of Jesus Christ use the mill for grinding wheat. Christ's wife, being an important woman in the world, was entitled to borrow the man's mill. For his refusal the man was condemned to live in a mill, and was transformed into a tortoise, which lives between its upper and lower shells, as though in a grinding mill. All tortoises were once bad men. Pencils and cigarettes, too, were often, though not always, dead men transformed. Judging by the war-time English cigarettes I smoked, I think Nassim must have been right.

Another of Nassim's peculiar ideas, which I afterwards found had wide currency in the villages, was that the earthquakes taking place in Turkey (sending their tremors as far as Akhterine) were caused by Hitler to show his anger when the Turks annoyed him. Here, too, as well as at Idlib, Hitler was affectionately known as Abu Ali, and was also, according to Nassim, a Moslem. When I asked Nassim how he knew this, the answer was a matter of simple logic. "Because he is strong. All Moslems are strong, therefore Hitler is Moslem. All the world against Hitler, and he is not beaten." Nassim had been to school and could read and write Arabic, a rare achievement for a peasant. But like all Moslems I questioned when they started telling me what a fine guy Hitler was, he had not the vaguest idea where Germany was. "Over there" he guessed, pointing towards the Black Sea. "But how far?" I then asked. "Oh . . . perhaps about 120 hours donkey-back." England, too, and France and even India were all "over there", at distances ranging from 100 to 200 hours donkey-back. Nassim knew that 100 hours donkey-back represented 500 kilometres, or about 300 miles, so that this intelligent and schooled youth thought that England was somewhere between Erzerum and the Caucasus, in eastern Turkey. Germany and India were also somewhere in the same region.

Nassim was useful to me in two ways. Firstly, he was able to explain the location of villages in that frontier

area, and secondly, his talkativeness and command of English revealed to me many peculiar twists and mysteries of the peasant mind. He saw nothing wrong in borrowing money from other people, saying it was for the "English sergeant", but keeping it for himself. He also had a habit of borrowing cigarettes from the station-master and the customs officials at the station, promising that the "English sergeant" would repay them in due course. I only learned about the cigarettes that were borrowed on my behalf when, some weeks later, a customs official jokingly reminded me that I must be a heavy smoker. Nassim did not smoke, but I found he had been selling the cigarettes in the village.

His imagination soared to fantastic heights, and was never better illustrated than when he told me that the disused German quarries behind the station were inhabited by monkeys. I could not think what he meant, and to see if he had got hold of the wrong word I showed him the picture of a monkey in an old American magazine. "Yes," he said, "those animals. Thousands of them living amongst the rocks." He said he had often seen them, and had even caught some and beaten them to death. On the head of the Prophet, on the head of his father, mother and sisters, he swore that he had caught monkeys at Akhterine. The monkeys, I eventually saw for myself, were foxes, and not in thousands either. Neither had he ever caught one.

Living with the platoon of forty-five Indians solved rather than created problems. Often short of suitable rations, I shared many of their meals of curried goat and vegetables. I strolled into their quarters and they came into mine. We spent much time looking at each other and grinning, but soon began exchanging useful phrases in English and Hindustani. Occasionally I took the havildar or a lance-naik and a couple of sepoys on long patrols around the tracks. They were colour-conscious, and were not keen to enter Arab villages.

I did not care what notions they may have had in mind

about British raj in India. My simple rustic mind could not probe the motives for the colour and race distinctions that go with colonial rule. These soldiers were sometimes childish, but they had the sensitiveness and feelings of a cultured and reflective race of people. They had, moreover, all the normal little virtues and vices common to good human beings. My relations with them were guided by instinct and intellect, not by tradition and set standards.

One sunny day in the spring we were honoured with a visit of inspection by the Area Commander, nicely adorned with red tabs, and escorted by a perfect example of mediocrity, a silent and insignificant A.D.C. The colonel barked at the jemadar and havildar from outside the camp perimeter, wanting to know why they did not understand English. I hardly understood it myself. He raged and spluttered, his impatience causing him to forget to show a sympathetic interest in their welfare.

After his departure the Indians were silent and dejected. They had been made to look foolish before an amused crowd of Arab peasants, their invitation to a cup of tea had been curtly refused, and the colonel had declined to put a foot inside the camp. I shared the Indians' sentiments. The exhibition was not amusing. I felt disgusted, especially as I had been singled out for particularly courteous treatment and intelligent enquiries. The Indians looked at me with eyes full of silent resentment.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ARAB SPRING

AKHTERINE was situated near the northern fringe of rich fertile plains which stretched eastwards some 300 miles to Iraq and southwards until they gradually merged into the Syrian desert. From the summit of the 130-foot tell adjoining the village one looked eastwards out over a flat plain, dotted with villages and hamlets that were linked by a network of tracks, until it disappeared with the curve of the earth. Trains going towards Iraq disappeared, like ships at sea, over the curved horizon, until only their smoke was visible.

Train-security duties normally tied me to the station and camp, but occasionally there were days when no trains came to Akhterine, and there was often an interval of up to twelve hours between the departure of one train and the arrival of the next. I therefore found time to go out and explore the countryside, now and again in the company of Indians, sometimes alone, and sometimes with one or more of the officials at the station.

Everywhere the villagers were extremely courteous and hospitable, and village life, without any of the amenities, occupations and distractions of Western civilisation, was carried on as it has been for centuries.

Family routine was of an extreme simplicity. Everyone was always up before sunrise, and while the women did the housework, drew the water from the well, and fetched and prepared the fuel for the fires, the men worked on the crops and vegetable plots until noon. After an idle afternoon the latter would gather at the moukhtar's house to gossip, sip coffee and smoke until bed-time. The women, always tired

after their labours, went early to bed.

The peasants had no occupations but housekeeping and tending the crops, and everything was done in a leisurely way. The wheat for the next day's bread would be spread out on a smooth surface to dry in the sun, whilst mother and children would spend as much as two hours sifting it to remove every particle of dirt. Then a son or daughter would take it to the nearest village with a mill to have it ground into flour. Early next morning the flour would be taken to the public oven and cooked into bread for breakfast. Bread was always eaten warm and soft.

Though I tried to puzzle things out, and questioned the Syrian Christian officials who were with me at the time, I failed completely to understand the deep-seated motives and traditions that determined the relationship between man and woman. Only a study of Islamic culture and history might provide a clue to explain the gulf that separated the sexes.

Nor was it possible to discover what went on in the peasant mind during the long hours of idleness. The children did not know what toys were, the men had no hobbies, whilst such things as books, sport, mechanical devices, clubs and cultural activities did not exist. Yet the peasants never appeared to be bored, they were always cheerful, though in a resigned way, and were never in want of something to talk about. Furthermore, their manners, bearing and whole demeanour revealed, deep in their souls, the presence of an ancient civilised culture, and a well developed *savoir-vivre*.

It was an ironical thought that closer contact with the West would improve their material condition, but undoubtedly cause their high standard of manners and courtesy to deteriorate.

None of these peasants had ever been to school, read a book or a newspaper, few had ever been in a cinema and scarcely any had been to a doctor, though they were all sick and ailing. Their notion of the world beyond their physical vision was based largely on imagination and hearsay. It was

impossible to convince them that the English summer was different from the Syrian, that strings of camels did not wander through the streets of London carrying sacks of grain and vegetables. The primitive single-track railway to Baghdad that skirted the village of Akhterine was their conception of railways the world over. That some trains travel under electric power only raised a smile almost of contempt ; electricity, I was informed, makes light, and light does not make trains move. Oh no, you could tell that tale to the ignorant Bedu, but not to intelligent villagers.

Abandoned in their ignorance and their ill-health, and left to survive against overwhelming odds as best they could by their own efforts, the peasants knew they had only one friend — a Syrian official, a Christian. To uplift them was his life's ambition. But they pitied him for being an infidel, a Nazarite or Nazarene, as they called it. They were convinced he was doomed to eternal damnation. But they were helpful, and willingly reported on the presence of suspicious strangers in the neighbourhood. No people are more clannish than the Arabs, and any stranger, apart from wandering Bedouins or government officials, who allows himself to be seen in any village or on any land beyond the confines of his own clan, is at once regarded with suspicion. Smugglers had their regular routes and village contacts, and were accepted as friendly strangers, but no unknown individual could ever approach a village without arousing alarm. I too came to learn about all the propagandists, arms distributors, pro-Nazi and pro-Turkish agents who ventured into the area. And when, for instance, a group of ardent French sympathisers toured the villages, compelling the moukhtars to sign on behalf of whole communities a petition declaring their satisfaction with, and desire to remain under, French mandate, I was so promptly informed of their movements that I could have gone out and found them without trouble. On all these matters I worked in close co-operation with various Syrian officials, though on the question of

Anglo-French unity, which was a permanent problem, they tended to disagree with me. They had a habit of praising the British and disparaging the French.

The peasants, however, had no doubts about the greatness of Abu Ali, alias Adolf Hitler. It would have been hopeless trying to destroy the Hitler myth in their stubborn minds. By comparison with Hitler, Churchill was a man of minor stature. Hitler was on a par with Lawrence of Arabia. The latter had brought freedom and independence to the Arabs freed from Turkish domination (so they thought), and Hitler was going to drive out the French, wipe out the Zionists down in the land of the Philistines, and give lots of money and gold to the Arabs. There was not only the myth of Hitler: there was also that extraordinary myth of the German Superman. To these simple villagers all Germans were men of enormous and robust stature, bigger and broader physically than Englishmen and Frenchmen, both of whom, thanks to their "decadence", had become smaller than the Germans. "Superman" they understood only in the physical sense. I tried patiently to show them that Englishmen were as good as Germans, but it was utterly impossible to convince them that we were better. Their argument was that if we were really better than the Germans we would have won the war long since. They were quite prepared to agree that the English were superior after we had smashed Germany, but until then the German myths would prevail. Since there was no leadership, and subtle propaganda was whispered round the countryside into minds waiting a lifetime for a ray of hope, it was easy to see how they had been influenced. Their belief in Hitler and Germany was the direct result of good Axis propaganda, especially in the pre-war years. I was told that, had the Germans been occupying Syria instead of the French and British, the Arabs would be better off. This argument often left me wondering.

But one could not blame them if the German myths made

some appeal. They had to look somewhere for hope, especially as Allah was not very generous. They were too resigned to show fight against neglect, adverse conditions and exploitation, which, in the West, would have provoked a revolution. With a Syrian officer, a good personal friend, I had very considerable influence. He played the main role in a war we made on effendis who were flogging and robbing helpless peasants. But I was too handicapped to help effectively in such work. With plenty of money, a vehicle and a better knowledge of Arabic I could have done some useful work, but as it was I had, officially, to restrict my activities to ensuring the security of the frontier, which included, of course, the trains. I had not the money, the time or the official backing to extend my activities beyond my defined duties.

Spring was brief. The whole countryside leapt into life, and on sunny days an abundant heat drew up the tender corn which covered the vast steppe with a rich green carpet. The snow level on the Turkish mountains was rising perceptibly higher ; one day a vast flock of storks, covering square miles of sky, winged their slow way northwards, across the mountains to the plains of southern Russia ; scores of birds returned to the little cluster of trees at the station, chirping all day ; isolated wild flowers pushed up their heads from the green corn, drawing their strength from bulbs deep in the soil. In one month they would wither under a merciless sun, and the bulbs, deep and secure, would sleep for another ten months. Small snakes wriggled amongst stones and grasses ; ants of a dozen types ran in every direction ; and small scorpions whose tails would not extend over the rim of a florin, came indoors for night warmth. At night, elusive will-o'-the-wisps danced uncertainly over the plain.

In Akhterine village new-born lambs were being slaughtered for cheese. After birth, having drunk of its mother's milk, the lamb goes straight to the knife without being allowed to eat grass or other food. The milk in its stomach is sufficiently concentrated in strength to make a

large amount of cheese. The lamb's skin is cured, sold for 1s. 6d., and later goes to Aleppo to be sold to Jews from Palestine for about 2s. 3d. For the villagers spring meant meat, which they had not tasted since Bairam, and would not taste again until Ramadan.

But spring brought little else to the hapless peasants. The warmth of the sun's rays drew them out of doors for most of the day, clothed in the long robes, quftan and red canvas shoes they wear all the year round. The women knew no fashions, and their red trousers drawn in at the ankles and covered with the blue cloth dress served to keep out both the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Spring in the air stirred no youthful emotions, though a bashful maiden, who may later share a husband with two or three other women, may steal a glance at a fine fellow who is not her cousin, and who is therefore forbidden fruit. At Akhterine every boy and girl had an average of twenty-four cousins living in the village, and at the age of 12 or 13 each boy had his future wife chosen for him by his parents from amongst the most suitable girl cousins. Never does a peasant marry a girl who is not his cousin.

The advent of spring brought very little change to the life of the village. Several mornings a week I wandered amongst the mud-brick houses and alleyways, watching the youths playing in groups at the sport of torturing dogs, chickens and lambs ; and the girls, also in small groups, performing menial tasks. The tiniest mites who were able to walk knew no sex distinction and played together, but no boy entering his teens could stop and speak or flirt with any girl in her teens. This code of behaviour was rigidly observed. It was more than a code of behaviour ; it was a traditional way of living, in much the same way that it is a tradition for young people in England to go courting. From the early teens until the day of marriage it is forbidden for boy and girl to speak to each other, or to address anyone of the other sex of about the same age. Ahmed, a youth who said he had

made sightseeing tours of Aleppo brothels, often broke the rules by throwing raucous remarks at his future wife. She was his first cousin, aged 13, went by the name of Ayisha, and was pretty, buxom, short, but well developed for her age, like all Arab girls. I wandered often about the village with Ahmed, listening to all the local scandal which he was very adept at collecting. We often went in the direction of his cousin Ayisha's house, and she would usually be occupied at some menial task. She might be drawing water up from the family well, carrying a large bag of wheat on her head, or squatting on the ground on her haunches mixing dung, straw, mud and water into a paste with her bare hands, making dung-cakes for fire fuel. Invariably, when we saw her, little Ayisha was busy performing some task that was below the dignity of men and boys. Ahmed would poke fun at her, humiliating the unhappy girl. "Can't you make better dung-patties than that?", "The camels and donkeys have not been generous with their dung recently", and "You won't be useful to me as a wife if you can't carry more than ten litres of water" were the quality of his remarks. After each utterance he would break into loud and rough laughter. One day we saw Ayisha at a distance of about fifty yards, walking towards us with two large rush mattings on her head. Ahmed at once charged towards her, yelling insulting remarks. The poor Ayisha dropped the mattings, turned about and scampered away as fast as her legs would carry her. Ahmed caught up with her, said a few words to the scared girl, probably of an insulting nature, and came back to me grinning and laughing. I do not know whether it was the urge of spring and romantic emotions which caused Ahmed to behave as he did, but he was breaking all the traditional religious and social rules by holding such verbal intercourse with his future wife. On a few occasions I saw him rebuked for it, either by his own elder sister or by his aunt, Ayisha's mother.

I spent much time in the village *gendarmerie*, at the

Mudir's office, in the village fruit gardens and in the homes of the peasants. None could lead more simple, unassuming lives. Spring or no spring, it was apparent that these peasants never experienced anything more emotional than the sentiment of pleasure, pleasure at simple things such as entertaining a guest, at sharing their food with him, at contemplating sleep. They never experienced the sentiments of satisfaction or gratification. Being entirely without ambition, they could not enjoy the satisfaction that comes from achievement and success. Sometimes a few of them showed an ambition to possess my watch, but it was no more than a sentiment of pleasure at the sight of a neat and pretty article of silver. They admired it not as a timepiece, for they could not read the time. I would pass them the watch to read the time, but they would look up or out at the sun and say "eleven hours". I would advance the hands by a couple of hours and ask them to read the time again. But according to them it was still eleven, because the sun said so.

Though an administrative centre for more than eighty villages, Akhterine was as much cut off from the outside world as the others. The war and politics were of no interest at all. The peasants contracted opinions like illnesses, and a strong rumour, usually concerning the French, Turkey, the new national army or German secret weapons, sweeping through the steppe, would be believed for a few days until it died out. Vague opinions came and went with the rumours, and could be harmful, like illnesses, while they lasted. Their simple way of life left the Arabs without the worries that age the "civilised" Westerner, and the sentiment of worry so common to the latter was replaced in these peasants by that of utter and complete resignation. The word Allah came out in every sentence, in every single sentence, they uttered. To Allah were ascribed all their ills, pains, poverty and lack of cash, but His meanness in this respect did not detract from His over-all goodness. It was Allah's wish that things were as they were, no matter how favourable or unfavourable they

were, no matter to what degradation or humiliation their circumstances exposed the peasants. Whatever things were like, it was just what Allah wanted, and could not be altered, except by Allah. If the train for Aleppo were late, Ma'a'leesh, it was Allah's wish ; and if the train left early, and they missed it, it was still Allah's wish. Their lives were thus without effort, design or purpose. They lived in a permanent state of relaxation and rest, both physical and mental, though it was impossible for them to be healthy since the stagnant, useless water that bred malaria-carrying mosquitoes was there by Allah's wish. It was nobody's business to dispose of it. Hence everyone contracted malaria, and this, too, was Allah's wish. Their physical sufferings in this world were necessary, and Allah would reward them in the next with forty wives apiece.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE GERMAN DREAM

THE Berlin-Istanbul-Baghdad railway enters Syria at its most north-westerly point at Meidan Ekbes, zigzags down through the mountains to Aleppo, then goes north-east to re-enter Turkey just south-east of Aintab. Akhterine is the last station before the line re-enters Turkey. It was therefore the frontier customs and security control station. After crossing back into Turkey the railway line forms the frontier of north Syria for some 300 miles, and then after crossing another section of Syria, known as the Duck's Bill, it enters Iraq some 70 miles from Mosul. The final link-up with Baghdad was achieved only in 1940, but the far greater part of the line in Syria was built by the Germans before and during their first world war.

Between Aleppo and Mosul the railway passes through empty but fertile steppe country, which is often referred to as the *beled*, or as "desert", though it is not strictly desert. It is merely deserted. The only two towns in the *beled* are Jerablus, 50 miles east of Akhterine, the site of excavations made by Lawrence of Arabia; and Kamichlié, Syria's rich and thriving steppe town where, at present, fortunes are being made over night. North of the railway line are several Turkish towns, all of them thirty miles or less from it. They are Killis, Aintab, Nizip, Birejik, Surutch, Harran (where Abraham sojourned), Urfa and Mardin. Aintab and Urfa each have nearly 100,000 inhabitants, while close to Mardin is the large Kurdish-Armenian town of Diarbekir. The Germans, who got a concession to build the railway, deliberately bypassed these Turkish towns. Their plan was to construct the line through the fertile steppes and settle

German colonists along it, in German towns and villages. It was a grandiose ambition : the Berlin-Baghdad dream was not so much the railway line as the German towns and settlements it would link up. A strategic railway to the Persian Gulf had to be in German hands ; hence the colonies and towns that were planned, but never built, all along the route.

Ethnically, the railway divides the Arab world from the Turkish ; it runs along the northern fringe of the vast Arab countries, borders Kurdistan, and runs through the Mosul-Kirkuk oil country. The plan was perfect. The Germans knew what they were about. It was at the same time a threat to India and Western oil interests in the Arab lands and Persia, and an obstruction to Russian ambitions to expand southwards. The present frontier between Turkey and Syria was fixed by agreement when the French were awarded the Syrian Mandate. The railway between Aleppo and Mosul was the constant prey of bandits, so the French, to avoid the cost of policing the line with the 10,000 troops required to render the transport of goods and passengers safe, agreed to the frontier being adjusted so as to exclude the railway line. Thus, to-day, along the 300-odd miles of track on the frontier, you step out of one door into Turkey and out of the opposite door into Syria.

There is a wayside station, on the average, every twenty miles along the line, and like all Turkish railways the Istanbul-Baghdad line is single-track only. Nearly all the stations were built as coaling- and watering-points, and also as convenient crossing places for passing trains. And no doubt they were planned to be close to the prospective German colonies. Running as it does across the empty steppes, the railway, although it may be a convenience to a small number of travellers, is, under peace-time conditions, a white elephant. During the war it came into its own, and became a useful overland route for various goods and stores between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

During the war, sea traffic for civilians between Europe and the Far East ceased, and travellers were obliged to use the Baghdad railway. All through the war the Taurus Express ran twice a week in each direction between Istanbul and Baghdad, taking passengers to and from Russia, India, Iraq, Iran, China and Afghanistan.

The Taurus Express was the only land link between Europe and Allied-controlled territory, and on every journey it carried passengers into or out of an otherwise closed Europe. There were, during the war, four frontiers between Allied-held territory and neutral countries, excluding the Far East: (1) Northern Ireland, (2) the Russo-Turkish frontier, (3) the Turco-Iraqi frontier and (4) the Turco-Syrian frontier. The Taurus Express made the Turco-Syrian frontier by far the most important of the four, and when the British army entered Syria in 1941 strict security measures were applied to render difficult the crossing of the frontier by Axis agents. During its 102 miles' transit journey through a corner of north Syria the Taurus Express became a sealed train, with an armed British sentry at every door. No passenger or train staff, apart from the guard and the engine crew, could enter or leave the train without the permission of the British military authorities. It was well known that the Taurus Express had already carried in its luxury sleeping- and restaurant-cars more international agents and spies than any other train in the world.

With no less than seven Allied and Turkish control points between Ankara and Baghdad the Taurus ceased to be very express. Seven to eight hours were usually required to get the train through the 102 miles in Syria, and it took longer still when there were a large number of international travellers whose identity had to be thoroughly verified. There were days when travellers had to be closely interrogated, their luggage pulled to pieces, their papers and letters thoroughly examined and all their clothing removed. Many unsuspecting agents were surprised to find them-

selves removed from the train and taken to destinations they least desired to see.

I had two colleagues working with me on the railway. One was stationed permanently at Meidan Ekbes to take charge of the trains when they entered Syria, and the other, Fred Cushing, working from Meidan Ekbes, who travelled on the trains and did some sterling work amongst the passengers entering Asia by the back door. Young Fred, who came to the Middle East straight from the university and was initiated into railway security work by his very capable predecessor, Corporal Brown, had a facility for remembering not only people's faces, but also their ways and habits. Time was always short, for one never knew whether a top-ranking agent had slipped through the control at Meidan Ekbes, and while the train was on its way down to Aleppo, Fred was wandering about the coaches, from the private sleeping-coupés to the restaurant-car, from the third class to the luggage van, from there to the kitchen, and from the kitchen to the guard's compartment, always concealing the real purpose of his movements. Few travellers from Europe, seeing a British soldier in a train in Syria, would guess that he spoke not only French and Turkish, but also understood one of the more obscure European tongues. Most travellers rightly assume that the English, as a rule, understand only their own language. But at the times and places where linguists are most required the British army can always put the men who speak the right languages. My colleague at Meidan Ekbes spoke six languages, Fred knew three or four, and I was well versed in two European languages, apart from my own. And if our combined total of foreign tongues was sometimes inadequate, an urgent message would be sent to our Aleppo office, where further obscure languages, also spoken by British soldiers, were available.

The east-bound Taurus usually arrived at Akhterine in the bleak, cold dawn, and Fred, living up to the appearance of having had a night up, would run over the passengers to me.

"So-and-so," he would say, "is probably an enemy courier, but we've got nothing on him yet. He's going down to Basra, so we'll look out for him when he comes back next week." Then I would get a remarkable amount of detail about a Chinese student returning home from Berlin, an oriental diplomat on his way home from Switzerland, or a Turkish civilian who, according to Fred, had last made the journey three weeks previously and was probably collecting information from Syrian travellers on British troop dispositions along the frontier. How Fred managed to collect so much information in so short a time I never knew. He was a wizard at it, and not a single traveller in the train escaped his attention. Having handed over the train to me he would get a mug of tea and chipatties from the Indians, and then complain about the bugs on my bed, where he would lie down for an hour's sleep while awaiting the west-bound train coming in from Baghdad.

About a third of the Taurus passengers were usually Turkish subjects travelling between western and south-eastern Turkey. Amongst them were often unofficial and self-appointed propaganda and political agents whose business in the train amongst the European and Syrian passengers was not only their own. Turkish opinion was not always in line with the Allied. Turkish passengers, dressed by the law of their country in European clothes (always ill-fitting), regarded themselves as members of a master race, and superior to British, French and Arabs alike. Turkish officials in uniform sometimes refused to show their papers, uttering the remark : "Ben Turkim" ("I am a Turk"), as though by this Fred or I were to conclude that they were above having their identity verified. When pressed to observe the security regulations they would continue to be stubborn, and would occasionally send for the Turkish policeman on duty in the train to deal with awkward passengers, and complain against us for importuning them. The superior attitude of Turkish officials was a forced one, and did not come naturally. Kemal

Ataturk had told them the Turks were a master race, and the only way they could convince foreigners of this was by saying such silly things as "I am a Turk". More than one Turk told Fred and me, when we dealt with them politely but firmly, "I'll get you for this", or "I'll report you to my government". Many educated and charmingly polite Turks told me it was Turkey's destiny to shape the future of all her Balkan and Arab neighbours. If train passengers were any criterion, the population of Turkey was pro-Nazi to a man. They had nothing but contempt for the British and French, regarding us as decadent and the French as completely finished. They asserted that secret weapons would in the end win the war for Germany. They disliked Britain because of her alliance with Russia, whom every Turk is taught to fear. Many told me it was their hope to see Russia get a good hiding at the hands of Germany. In a vague way they feared Hitler, but felt far enough away from Central Europe to be safe from German occupation. When eventually the flying bomb arrived Turks did not attempt to disguise their glee. Said a Turkish railway director from Istanbul to me one day, "The flying bomb proves Germany's technical superiority. If Allied technicians were as good as Germany's the Allies would also use the flying bomb. The population of London have now been confined to their shelters for five days, and dare not come out. Only hunger will bring them out." When I smiled at this remark he was annoyed, and said, "Of course, I can understand that you haven't been told about the flying bomb. But in Turkey there is no reason to keep back the truth."

Fred knew better than I whether the Taurus merited its unofficial title, the *bordel ambulant*. He spent more time in it than I did, and more closely observed the idiosyncrasies, the comings and goings, and the friendships of its inhabitants. It was a far step from the feudal atmosphere of Meidan Ekbes or Akhterine to the sleeping and luxury cars whose travellers had just come out of Germany, Sweden,

France, Holland and other countries with some of the latest news of Europe. Going westwards into Europe on business (which interested Fred and me as much as themselves) were travellers from Chungking, Kabul, Bombay, Baghdad and Teheran. There were engineers, diplomats, students, journalists and others about whom one never knew enough. It is surprising how much information carried by travellers comes out in casual conversation. A few hours of travel on the Taurus provided us with a wealth of all kinds of information, which flowed easily from travellers' lips. What was not so easy was the collection of information about the travellers themselves. News from Turkey was plentiful, for some travellers were Turkish citizens who were always in and out of the country. Some ran profitable smuggling rackets in silk stockings, Swiss watches, gold and mail, and one or two were suspected of more serious activities, so they often gave obliging, if unwilling, answers to questions about fellow travellers and certain events in Turkey. A dining- or sleeping-car *habitué* cannot help noticing which traveller dines with whom, which spends much time in another's private coupé, when people are confined for four or five days to the restricted space of a train.

The clean sheets and polished woodwork, the immaculate uniforms of the attendants in the luxury end of the train inhabited by Prime Ministers, diplomats, engineers, Arab princes, Turkish princesses, Egyptian professors, mystery men and beautiful blondes (some of the spy fiction type) contrasted strongly with the hard-seated third-class coaches occupied by sturdy Kurdish mountaineers, dirty Arabs and lice-carrying Turks. These peasants were always gorging themselves on sticky dates, white cheese, grapes, peanuts and salted nuts. In nearly every train there were lice on the garments and neckwear of Turkish peasants. Here, again, one had regular evidence of the New Modern Turkey one hears so much about from English travellers who write books on this backward country. As a health pre-

caution Fred or I often had to forbid the Indian soldiers of the train-guard escort from taking their seats between the stations. We found many virulent diseases amongst the passengers, including typhoid, many types of fever and advanced T.B. Scarcely ever during the summer did we succeed in going through the crowded third-class corridors without having to walk over sick, feeble bodies lying on the floor. The stench was offensive. The waste food, the smell of arak, vomited meals, peasants and Bedouins dripping with fever sweat, normal human perspiration, tightly packed consumptives from Iraq (they always came from Iraq): it all combined to destroy one's sense of delicacy. In almost every compartment there would be a woman breast-feeding an infant, for all to see, with her wrists jingling with English gold sovereigns on enormous bracelets.

Even the suspects we were expecting often turned up and fell into the net. Although they cannot be related here, there were rarely two cases alike, and each had to be dealt with according to his nuisance or danger value. Nor were they always men. The beautiful, ravishing blondes so essential to spy romances actually do exist, but not in such large numbers as the romancers would have us believe. The war story of the Taurus Express would be a tale perhaps stranger than fiction. But I am not qualified to relate it.

## CHAPTER XVI

### DESERT TRAIN

IN addition to the Taurus Express and the goods trains we had three "mixed" trains a week in each direction. The "mixed" trains were half passenger and half goods, and ran between Adana, in Turkey, and Tel Kotchek, on the frontier of Iraq, a journey of nearly 700 miles. The stinking passenger coaches of the mixed trains were like travelling villages. They were always overcrowded with Arab, Turkish and Kurdish peasants who, as soon as the train set out from Aleppo on its long trek across the steppes to Iraq, settled down to sociable picnics and jovial intercourse. Many men would go to the lavatory, change into pyjamas and return thus to their seats to keep cool in the stifling heat. Never mind the dirt, the stench, the sickness, the numerous mothers breast-feeding their infants: there was much good humour, joviality and *bonhomie*, and as I pottered about the train, looking here and listening there, invitations would come from all sides to join in the eating and drinking. Meals would be spread on suit-cases, glass and arak would appear, and a vast variety of food would be conjured out of enormous wicker baskets. The oriental peasant was never meant to sit in trains, for there he is totally out of his element, much as a bank clerk would be trying to work in a barn. Women of all classes, whether travelling first, second or third, made a habit of feeding their infants, taking it for granted that no one objected. Legal prostitutes travelling to the brothels in Syria's New Jerusalem, the thriving steppe town of Kamichlié, managed to move about the train and get into the first-class compartments, to book future business.

In the spring, when the pilgrims were flocking back

from Mecca and other places in the Hedjaz, the long frontier wait at Akhterine gave them an opportunity to swarm from the trains and do their devotions. This concession had to be made to them. They would first draw a little pint can full of water from the station pump, then "wash" their hands, forearms, face and feet after spreading the prayer-mat and before kneeling on the ground to hit the good soil with their foreheads. It amazed me to see how easily they knew the direction of Mecca. America, Russia or England they would not get right in six guesses, but they did not hesitate to face Mecca when praying. The sheftren always locked the lavatory doors when the train was in the station, to keep down the fly population after the train had left. So the devout Moslems, having said their prayers, and promptly feeling the strong call of nature, would go behind the trains and use the railway tracks, no matter how many people were watching them. The Armenian station-master often caught them at it, waited till they had adjusted their robes, dragged them in and fined them two lire for giving flies the opportunity to breed in the vicinity of the station.

Goods trains had a habit of coming in from Turkey at varying hours of the night, though they usually only went out by day. Every week whole trainloads of Turkish tobacco went down to Basra for shipment to America ; regular trainloads of mules came in from Iran for urgent shipment to the bogged British army in Italy ; there were tens of thousands of sheep for the army, and trainloads of oil-drums for the refineries at Abadan. Contraband came in from Turkey on every train, but my only interest was information. I often obtained useful information from the customs documents or the labels on the trucks. Occasionally clandestine travellers were found hiding on goods trains.

The goods-train crews, eight to ten per train, were nearly all smugglers and many were carriers of mail and information. The brakeman's pay was 45 lire a month (about £5), so there was every inducement to make their regular frontier

crossings a special source of income. By arrangement with the customs officers I often had them lined up in the station hall and thoroughly searched. The search for special contraband (arms, drugs, etc.) was no easy matter and rarely succeeded. Likely places were the huge lamps on the front of the engine, oil-boxes, cracks and slits in the woodwork of trucks, and amongst bales of cotton and sacks of wheat. Travel by goods train across the dreary steppe was dull ; sometimes I found a seat on an agricultural machine, but usually I had to be content to curl up amongst sacks of wheat or in the brakemen's little cabins built at the end of each truck. The guard's van was the most uncomfortable place on a goods train. On one occasion I was obliged to share a brakeman's cabin with a little Turkish maniac whose special side-line was the sale of white burial shrouds to a booth-keeper in the Aleppo soukhs. He obtained the shrouds at night from the shallow graves of newly buried Moslems in an Aleppo cemetery. Not only he, but all his workmates assured me that this gruesome side-line brought him as much money as his regular railway job.

Once a week a trainload of tanks, aircraft predictors or field artillery came up from Baghdad on its way to Ankara. The Turks were getting some lend-lease material, all of it on our obsolete list, though the tanks were known by a name that was a household word back in 1942. The Turks could do little more with this material than use it for training purposes. For the transit through Syria an armed escort of the Transjordan Frontier Force (who had replaced the Alwar Indians) was put on the train. The Turkish captain or lieutenant, whose platoon of men had escorted the train along the frontier would come up to me, click his heels and salute, as though I were a colonel. He would be in his Sunday-best uniform to give a good impression, though he still looked no better than a tramp alongside the Arab soldiers of the Transjordan Frontier Force, with their red sashes, blue putties, black lamb kalpaks, spotless boots and shining rifles. The

Turkish soldiers, too, were decked out to impress, though their greatcoats (which they carried for protection against the night cold) were torn and frayed at the ends, their boots rugged and often with half a sole, and their putties in rags. They were a shabby, scruffy gang, and the only indication that they were soldiers at all was the smart way they stood to attention when their officer spoke to them. I had been across the frontier and seen Turkish soldiers at the Tchoban Bey station barracks dressed in their everyday uniforms. I have seen them — or some of them — clothed partly in a coarse sacking, and with their boots tied to their feet with string. Their pay was 25 kurus (about 7d.) a week, insufficient to pay for their cigarettes. Here was more shining evidence of the New Modern Turkey we hear so much about.

Discipline in the Turkish army was fierce, and an officer had the power to beat up his men, who were invariably illiterate peasants. All the Turkish officers who came to Akhterine in charge of trainloads of war material must have had orders to be both correct and officious. They all saluted me (though I did not tell them it was unnecessary), and they all insisted on my checking the registration numbers on the tanks and guns with those on the documents they handed me. If the correct number of tanks was on the train, I would argue, there was no need to verify the individual registration numbers. "Rija ederim!" ("I insist, please!") They just had to have my signature that the numbers tallied and were correct. If some peasant at a wayside station, where the engine had stopped to take in water, had removed a tank and replaced it with another one, I would point out, then the registration numbers would require checking. But it also meant that the soldiers must have been asleep while the peasant was swapping tanks around. In answer to this argument I would get an incomprehensible stare. Finally, I would agree to the request, to prevent the officer going back home and reporting me for insulting him and not co-operating. Turks had a habit of playing a peculiar game, so it

was not worth while taking any chances. But I, too, could dot the i's and cross the t's. When the officer was over-officious, I had his soldiers isolated while they were waiting for the return train to Turkey. I had them placed in a room at the station and kept local people from conversing with them.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MASTER RACE—AND PAWNS

FEW Englishmen in the Orient could have had a more tedious job than that allotted to Fred Cushing and me. We had to make sure that nobody was travelling in the trains, even under an assumed name, who might not have been keen to see us. Few Englishmen, on the other hand, had perhaps the dubious opportunity that we had of keeping daily, though sometimes interesting, contact with every class of oriental society. The Europeans, too, were well mixed, though far less numerous than the Asiatics. I travelled thousands of miles in the trains, though many thousands fewer than Fred, sharing the private coupés of the rich and the hard seats of the poor. We were the only people who had this double privilege, for not even the train staff moved about as much as we had to. What little I now know of Asiatics comes only from personal experience and contact. I have not read books about them or made a study of oriental races, religion and lore.

The daily experience of oriental life in the raw is now all nothing but a memory, though a memory that can be refreshed and stimulated by reference to copious notes taken down at the time. Even now, at this distance, the word “Turk” at once suggests much that is unpleasant in the human character. Of all the vast variety of nationalities with whom I have had dealings both prior to and during the war, the Turk shows most evidence of totalitarian regimentation. I have already said more than enough about these people in a previous chapter, but here perhaps I should add that I attribute the difficult character of the Turks whom I came across — and I can number them in tens of thousands — to forced education. The Turkish peasant — and 80 per cent

of Turks are peasants — has been forcibly and against his will shaken out of a centuries-long slumber : he is still rubbing his eyes at the unaccustomed glare of daylight. Against his slovenly nature he is being regimented and disciplined in a totalitarian state, he is forced to wear and look ludicrous in ill-fitting European clothes, and he is compelled to learn the Latin orthography. How would the Englishman react to an order forcing him to write English in Arabic or Urdu characters ? But the Turk cannot revolt, for his Government is ruthlessly totalitarian in the suppression of liberty. The fact of his using European clothes and the Latin orthography, added to the belief drummed into his mulish head that he belongs to a master race, has given the Turk a false notion of both his own and European values. He has, in his own mind, dragged himself up to European level, and at the same time, also in his own mind, dragged European standards down to his own level. His education and culture are still in the most primitive stages, in fact no higher than that of the British African negro. But in his own mind the Turk is as modernised and cultured as the average European. Education is compulsory, but the Turkish brain has too long been out of use and steeped in Islamic ignorance and peasant tradition to absorb anything more than the most elementary instruction. If a Turkish peasant on leaving school can add up a simple sum and write a couple of hundred words, it is an achievement. Too often have I seen Turks trying to write their names and addresses, and just succeeding in doing it, to be hoodwinked by English travellers who hurry through Turkey and write amazing fairy tales about the progress of "Modern Turkey". The "Modern Turkey" of propaganda and travel books is a thin façade : I did not see the façade, but I came up against much that was behind it.

When a Turk meets a man whom he knows to be a European he is at once on the aggressive defensive : this state of mind expresses itself in ill-tempered blustering. The

inferiority complex comes into full play. The Turkish brain is too sleepily oriental to match the brain of the European. Yet personally I envy the Turk his deep ignorance, for he only has to abandon his efforts at education to be happier than the average European. And I pity him his forced education, for it makes of him a ludicrous and inhuman being. Oil and water never did mix, but the Turkish State is attempting to get an admixture of European water to rich oriental oil. It just does not work. The better types of Turk were either the utterly ignorant peasants from the remote mountains, who were charmingly naïve and simple and whole-heartedly dirty, or the really well-educated business men, who had enough tact not to force their point of view too far. The worst types were the uniformed officials and civil servants — the police, customs officers, soldiers travelling in civilian clothes, railway personnel, agricultural combine workers and similar minor officials. These people were offensively chauvinistic, they blustered themselves ridiculous with their overriding inferiority complexes, and lost their tempers trying to impress me that, as Europeans, they were superior to English, French and Arab alike. One had only to look at them to see that as the Europeans they claimed to be they were appallingly inadequate.

At my job I was not merely a cog in a machine. I was also a solitary Englishman amongst thousands of orientals. I was the first Englishman that thousands of Turks, Kurds and Arabs had ever seen, so it was apparent that their opinion of me would be their opinion of all Englishmen. It is human nature to generalise. My conduct and appearance, therefore, had their propaganda value : agreed, small and even minute value, but it was an opportunity I could not afford to miss. Although when off train duty I often had the appearance of a tramp (a steppe-tramping tramp), and with my station friends was often more drunk than sober, I was, when the passenger trains were in, the most correctly and cleanly dressed individual for miles around. And though often

sorely incited to handle certain passengers roughly and to use coarse language to them, I consciously observed the most polite manner and address. It therefore gave me satisfaction to see the Turks losing their tempers, snarling and threatening to report me to their Government. Though roused to fury within, I resisted all temptation to adopt their methods of address. Many a time I wondered, when I saw the lice on the shirts and neckwear of these blustering Turks, what all the superior attitude was about. After being mad at me, they must have been, after my departure, just as mad at themselves. I was always pleased at scoring moral victories over Turks.

By contrast, the Kurds were the happiest and most pleasant railway passengers. In spite of their total ignorance, of their always irregular papers, the Kurds were ever ready to smile, ever obliging and co-operative. They were, too, the most picturesque passengers. The Kurd wears a form of turban, an ambitious moustache pointed at the extremities, a European waistcoat and a white sirwal (baggy trousers). None, not even the Kurds themselves, could explain their passion for waistcoats. The pockets were not the attraction, for I never found anything in them. Articles that normally go into pockets are carried by the Kurd in an oblong leather purse slung over his shoulder by a strap or cord. The Kurdish woman is not veiled. She, too, wears an impressive form of coloured turban, and ambitiously coloured robes with much embroidery work. She smiles even more readily than her great hulk of a husband, and does the talking and quibbling when any questions have to be answered. Kurdish women are often strikingly beautiful, and, alone amongst oriental women, readily show a winning smile in public.

Men and women alike travel barefooted both in summer and winter. They are big, broad and robust, and reduce their Arab companions to weak and insignificant stature. Many centuries of wild life in the rough mountains of Kurdistan have produced these fine physical specimens.

One rarely finds a Kurd less than six feet in height, while the women, too, are taller and bigger than their Arab sisters.

Many Kurds who find it hard to make a living on the sparse grass uplands of Kurdistan migrate to two large towns, Baghdad and Beirut, where they work as dock and builders' labourers, wheat carriers and porters. Town life is not their element, and their love for it is no more explicable than their passion for waistcoats. Since the emigrants are Turkish subjects and do not carry passports, they are smuggled and travel with false papers. Every week scores of them passed through my hands. They did not know they were the victims of a smuggling traffic in human labour. They were too dull-witted and ignorant to realise they provided a handsome slave trade for Levantine labour merchants (most of whom were Christians), who bought and sold them as they would buy and sell mules and camels. Kurds were more obedient than mules, and were cheaper to feed.

I one day watched two Syrian frontier inspectors subject five Kurds to appalling tortures in an attempt to make them reveal the names of the gang who were smuggling them to Beirut and issuing them with false papers. Each Kurd in turn broke down under extremely painful persuasion, after vainly appealing to me with a haunted look in his eyes. Their confessions tallied and they were taken to Aleppo for further grilling at a higher level. Here, each Kurd in turn denied all knowledge of his previous confession, denied ever having seen me or the Syrian inspectors before, denied having been subjected to torture at Akhterine. They were again subjected to abominably cruel methods of torture, but none would give way. They would rather have died than speak the truth again. The reasoning powers of the Kurd are weak, and he is stubborn by long tradition. When pressed to speak the truth he will, if he feels so inclined, unswervingly evade it, though in doing so he suffers more than if he were truthful. His stubbornness is surpassed only by his stoicism.

Whilst I am writing this it has been announced in the news that the Kurds are once again asking for autonomy and the setting-up of a democratic state. The English press prints this news with apparent seriousness. Kurdistan spreads over a large area of three countries — Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Any autonomy granted to the Kurds would involve territorial and political concessions by these three countries, a thing which is entirely out of the bounds of possibility. The Kurds are feudal serfs, 98 per cent illiterate, and do not understand the meaning of the word democracy, or for that matter any other political term. There is something uneasy and suspicious about a Kurdish request for the setting-up of an autonomous democratic state. We saw something like that happen in Azerbaijan. But perhaps our editors who print their thoughtless rubbish can tell us where the Kurds are to find sufficient literate persons to staff the administrative machinery of an autonomous state. True, the Kurds have always had a hankering after some sort of independence ; it is a natural hankering common to all races and religions in the Middle East, where everyone hates his neighbour. But a desire to be freed from Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian rule does not imply that the Kurds are equipped to organise their own state. They are not so equipped. An independent Kurdish state would be more feudal and autocratic than any other yet existing. It would be the subjection of 98 per cent to the will of 2 per cent.

The Kurds hate the Turks no less than they hate the Iraqis. They are warriors, and like a scrap. They are also fond of money, like all orientals. A handful of political agents, well equipped with funds, circulating in the Kurdish uplands and inciting the peasants to shout for democracy, would see rapid results. We saw rapid results in Azerbaijan. The same thing will one day happen in Kurdistan. Nor will U.N. be able to prevent it. Kurdistan sits astride the Siirt-Mosul-Kirkuk oilfields. Siirt is a new oilfield, discovered in 1940 and developed since then by German

technicians. Between Siirt and Mosul there is probably more oil below the ground than has yet been taken from it. The Mosul-Kirkuk oilfields feed the Haifa refineries. Kurdistan, not only already a strategic area geographically, but economically is a more important region than all the vast country in Northern Iran recently conceded to Russia for oil-prospecting purposes. Kurdistan is the most probable area in the Middle East where trouble — important trouble — can break out. But we can be sure that political trouble there will not come from the Kurds alone. If there is a Kurdish revolt it is certain that someone will have put them up to it. The first result will be the drying-up of the Haifa oil refineries.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### TURKISH FRONTIER POSTS

THE Armenian station-master, his Chaldean assistant and the half-dozen customs officers at Akhterine were all men of tough moral fibre and physical strength. Together with the Mudir from the village and the French security lieutenant we made a small but happy community. There was no café, restaurant, bath, cinema, cabaret or any form of entertainment nearer than Aleppo, so we had to make our own amusements. During the summer months we made a practice of pooling our food and preparing a combined supper with arak under a pressure lamp suspended from one of the trees at the station. Far away across the dark plains twinkled the only lights, the lights of the Turkish town of Killis, situated in the foothills of the mountains. We would prepare anything up to a dozen dishes, which included fish from the river Kuweik, about eight miles away, hedgehogs and small birds not unlike sparrows. These birds lived in large numbers in the foliage of the station trees, and were catapulted to earth by a customs official standing under them. Some twenty to thirty of these birds, plucked, would be roasted whole, insides and all. Hedgehog stew, with onions and tomatoes, made a savoury dish, whilst the usual array of Arab dishes, supplemented by a tin of soya links or "Spam" or a chicken, built up an ample meal that would last from dusk until two or three o'clock the next morning. There would never be a dull moment, for conversation — in French, Turkish and Arabic — flowed freely and quickened with the drinking.

The French officer and I were regarded as "soft". We were told that we knew nothing of the rigours of a hard,

lonely life in the Syrian beled. Our companions were men, tough men. Their whole life was spent away from their families, except for short leave spells. No educated official, especially if he were a Christian, could expect his wife and children to live in the dreaded beled. My companions thought they were lucky to be at Akhterine, for it was, by train, close to Aleppo, but they lived in constant resignation at the prospect of being sent further east. Cut off from normal social intercourse, these permanent exiles lived under the most primitive conditions. There was no doctor to attend them in the regular attacks of malarial fever. They were too few to be able to adopt a system of shifts. The station-master and his assistant worked twelve hours on and twelve off; the customs officers took their rest and sleep between the trains. They turned out in force for every train, night as well as day. In the rainy season they worked in drenching rain, soaked to the skin, for they were not provided with waterproof clothing. Their officer drove them ruthlessly, and made them search, quite frequently, every single truck in a long train. At night they rarely had less than three trains to deal with, each train occupying them anything up to two hours. Their job kept them busy for sixteen hours, at least, every day, not for short periods, but permanently. They remained bright and cheerful, they sweated with malarial fever as they worked, without a quinine pill to drive away the delirium. It was not surprising that they were hard drinkers, for the arak sustained their strength, and only their constant unending work kept them sane. The station-master drank little, for the safety of the trains was in his hands, but each of the customs men could empty a full bottle of arak between 8 and 10 P.M. and stay sober the whole night. Neither I nor the French officer could keep pace with them, though we did our best, and often got horribly drunk.

The next station eastwards along the railway line was Tchoban Bey, in Turkey. Apart from the station buildings

and barracks for the soldiers at the frontier post, there was nothing. The village of Tchoban Bey was in Syria, more than a mile from the lonely station, and hidden from it by a low hill. The frontier was 200 yards from the village. The inhabitants belonged to a Turcoman tribe whose chief was Saleh Nassan Agha, a friend of Lawrence of Arabia. Buried deep in the open steppe, Tchoban Bey was perhaps forty miles from a road, though it was close to the direct smuggling track from Aintab to Bab and Aleppo. It was strongly garrisoned with gendarmes, customs officials and a whole squadron of the French Circassian mounted regiment. Poor pay and large families were good enough pretexts for gendarmes and customs men to take every bribe they could, and let the smugglers get through. Across the frontier the Turkish customs and police also worked with the contrabandists on a sort of percentage basis. Smuggling was a highly organised and profitable racket, and those who were posted on the frontier to stop it made most money out of it.

These officials, like all I had met, were extremely friendly and courteous people. They could not do enough for me, though they sometimes felt I was putting my nose too far into their rackets. There was always a bed for me at the *gendarmerie* or at the rough Circassian barracks. Horses were placed at my disposal, and prestige demanded that I rode them, though without enthusiasm and in spite of the jeering attitude of some of the villagers. One morning my horse took fright and bolted, whilst the peasants who were about laughed loudly (so I afterwards learned) at my desperate efforts to sit tight with the reins dangling beyond my reach. I managed to maintain a precarious balance for half a mile, and, crestfallen, led the horse back to the crowd in the centre of the village. I had lost "face", for if there is one thing amongst Arabs you should be able to do well it is to ride a horse. Early one bitterly cold morning there was alarm in the village because some sheep in the immediate neighbourhood had been killed by wolves, which had apparently sneaked

down from the Turkish hills under cover of fog. A kind of wolf hunt, an unorganised and excited stampede, began. As the fog lifted, the soft outlines of three wolves were seen. They were trotting away towards the hills, well apart from one another, the nearest one stopping several times to turn and sniff the air. But they were too fast for their pursuers, and random bullets that were fired had no chance of hitting the mark. Someone afterwards suggested that I should replace the wasted rifle ammunition since I was the guest of village officials. The courtesy and unstinted hospitality shown to me made it hard to answer with a direct refusal, yet I was no more able to supply rifle ammunition than the English cigarettes I was always being asked for. I was just not able to obtain those things which had propaganda value and should have been available. My friends failed to understand the British method. So did I.

The only café was a mud-brick house that had been enlarged and altered to hold a crowd. Every night it was packed with rough Circassians, big and robust in their black kalpak headgear, customs men and gendarmes, smugglers and villagers, and an occasional Turkish soldier or official who had received permission to cross the frontier. The Turkoman villagers wore Arab keffieh and robes ; the Circassians, gendarmes and customs men all wore their smart French-style uniforms ; the occasional Turkish policeman his German-pattern uniform and red-banded peaked cap. The café was a veritable den, filled with thick tobacco smoke and the smell of tombac and arak, whilst men's voices shouted hoarsely in the thick, dense and hot atmosphere. There was no electric light, but several pressure lamps provided brilliant light in this shuttered, closed den. Soldiers and gendarmes played noisy dominoes, backgammon, tric-trac, stuck knives into wooden tables, ate rough meals off the dirty wooden surfaces (for the Circassian soldier had to feed himself) ; they discussed in Turkish, French and Arabic all sorts of topics, including contraband, smutty stories and women ;

they recalled their brothel exploits, their participation in family vendettas, and they fought amongst themselves. Never did a woman set foot in the café. It was a place for men who led adventurous and abnormal lives. It was a rough house, but it was good-humoured and gay ; men going out on duty would swallow a meal, take up their rifles and go off into the moonlight to shoot jackals and foxes, to collect bribes from friendly smugglers and to have a gun-fight with the desperate ones. Occasionally a customs man was brought in, wounded after a gun-fight with penniless or uncompromising smugglers.

Tchoban Bey that summer threatened, like many obscure villages the world over, to become famous in the war news. It seemed that someone somewhere had said something abrupt to Turkey about shipments of chrome to Germany. With the rising tension the morale of Arab and Turkoman peasantry fell to rock bottom. Rumours were hatched by the score, and were being taken seriously. All the villages were going to be forcibly evacuated ; the British were going to invade Turkey ; the Germans were going to do the same thing ; 30,000 Turkish troops had moved into Urfa ; the civilian population was being evacuated from Killis ; numerous batteries of Turkish artillery were being mounted in the hills dominating the plain ; and the British, for their part, were bringing up enough tanks, guns and lorries to fill an ocean.

There was no resistance to the rumours. The harvest, the peasants' main source of income, was only half finished and none of it was yet sold ; they would all be ruined and driven from their homes. There was no radio, no press, no Syrian voice of authority to steady nerves and restore confidence. Panic and flight, chaos and breakdown of simple village life were things one had to regard as possible.

As the days passed I began to appreciate the difficulties of Canute. A dozen rumours surged up for every one I tried to smother, and the flood was too strong. And what were the peasants to think when they saw me doing unusual

things? They saw me at Tchoban Bey with an officer (though they did not know he was a D.A.D.M.S.) who tested water supplies and children's spleens for malaria. When examining the infected water he remarked to me that the area was really too malarious for troops. And when he asked the Mudir how many thousand gallons of well-water the village could supply per day, I too felt there was something in the wind. The peasants also noted my passage in a truck to frontier posts in the unusual direction of Killis.

Tchoban Bey became a focal point, a real hotbed of rumours and information, and fertile imaginations busied themselves computing the strengths of the vast armies that were supposed to be facing one another.

Strangely enough the facts, when they did arrive, provided a steady anchorage and a sobering influence. The sky vibrated with the drone of Spitfires; routine gunfire roared across the plain; isolated scout jeeps raced about the dusty tracks; two Arabs made me a present of an unexploded British shell they had found; and the lights of Killis went out.

Then the tide ebbed, the harvesting continued, and Tchoban Bey resumed its centuries-old slumber, happier for having missed the fame that only war could give it.

## CHAPTER XIX

### LIFE IN THE STEPPES

IN day and night wanderings I visited nearly all the eighty villages and hamlets that were administered from Akhterine, the "capital" of the Sub-prefecture. There was not a single road in this wide area, where the inhabited places were all interconnected by a vast network of camel tracks. Abraham, the Bedouin shepherd of the Bible, used the oldest of the tracks to take his flocks and his tribe from the Turkish foot-hills near Harran to a place that is now called Aleppo. To-day Abraham's track is trodden by shepherds who still wear the same kind of clothing and sandals, and the same long beard. The Berlin-Baghdad railway runs parallel to it. Invaders came and built enormous tells or earth mounds rising to 150 feet above the plains, and the Germans came and built a steel highway. There are no other changes since Abraham's day. The sun beats down for six merciless months, and then the winter snows and rains make the steppes inaccessible to outsiders. Together the fierce icy blasts of winter and the equally fierce sun of summer contrive to prevent the growth of trees in the vast plains.

Having no army vehicle, I was reduced to tramping the countryside, to borrowing animal or arabiya, or paying the engine-drivers of goods trains English cigarettes to slow down in open country to allow me to jump off. Arab and Turkoman peasants often saw a foolish Englishman tramping in the midday sun, and must have thought, as others do, that the English are mad. They did not know that I always had an objective, that I was always going somewhere to get something, either food, or, more usually, information. I rarely drank village water, and often quenched my thirst by sucking

the roots of liquorice plants that grew wild in the steppe. But when I would call at a village for a bowl of sour milk to drink as a reviver, the peasants would smile graciously and suggest my remaining indoors to avoid getting sunstroke. From this complaint I felt immune. The Englishman in a hot climate rarely falls victim to more than one complaint, and as mine was recurrent stomach trouble, I did not consider the possibility of catching any others. Since my wanderings had to fit in with train duties, I often had to tramp in the midday sun, and thus appear mad.

There was not a single shop in all the eighty villages, and no doctor, book or newspaper ever reached the area. The only strangers, apart from smugglers, were normally an occasional pair of gendarmes, the District Officer from Akhterine and the mad Englishman, who was sometimes accompanied by a customs or railway official. I was made welcome in the villages, and where I was offered a mattress for the night the gendarmes had to demand it. To all visitors the peasant says "Fad-dal" ("Welcome"), whether he means it or not, but he is an artist in the use of this word, for the varying inflections and modulations of the voice indicate to the visitor whether to accept or not. When "Fad-dal" is uttered with a smile and a welcoming sweep of the hand, you can safely stay as long as you wish. A less generous gesture and a slightly sharper "Fad-dal" mean that you may stay only for a coffee and must then go. "Fad-dal" and a vigorous handshake, but no welcoming gesture, means that you are really welcome but that your host has other important business and cannot give you much time. And so it varies, right down to the glum and curt "Fad-dal", on hearing which you may as well depart forthwith, for your presence is definitely not wanted. The gendarmes often got this welcome, for they had a habit of taking away food the peasants could ill afford, of carrying off a couple of chickens, and of asking for baksheesh to drop a "frame-up" charge. The peasants assumed that I was not interested in smuggling,

and therefore talked more freely. They also advised me of the presence of strangers in the vicinity: nobody but a Turkoman or Arab peasant of the district could have any bona-fide reason for being in a village in the area, and when a stranger was observed it was a case of spreading the alarm.

There was malaria in every house at one time or another, there were mysterious illnesses and suspected cases of one or two infectious diseases. The existence of these I had to report immediately to the army authorities. Malaria in my district reached the proportions beyond an epidemic. It was as deadly as cholera, and during the change from summer to winter the death-rate from the fever was enormous. Some 600 people, out of a population of 15,000, died from malaria in less than four months in the early winter of 1943. The municipal doctor lived in a small town nearly thirty miles away, but had so many sick people on his own doorstep that he never had the time — even if he had the inclination — to go out looking for sickness in the 250 villages under his charge. No government can reasonably expect a doctor to keep down sickness in 250 villages when there are sick people in every house. It eased my conscience, when looking at all the sickness around me, to know that such suffering had been going on unchecked for hundreds of years. On each of my journeys into the countryside I distributed a pitiful handful of quinine pills. Very often I found that the victim, instead of taking the pill himself, had sold it for half a crown. Much of the malaria was of the malignant type, which sent men and women raving mad, their limbs rigid, and their tongues speechless. Such cases were usually fatal. In my whole area I was the only person free of the fever. Many peasants regarded me as a walking miracle, but I did not tell them that it was due to alcohol and heavy drinking. I let them think that it was due to the divine goodness of Allah, in keeping me, an infidel and a Nazarite, in good health. I would go back to a village after a month's absence and enquire for Hassan this or Mahmoud that, only to find

that malaria or some other disease had removed him for good. The reply to my enquiry often bordered on the callous. "Oh, he died last week. He had pains inside." "He had a bad fever and foam came from his mouth." "He had an attack of malignant malaria, had a brainstorm and died." I liked these peasants. They were stoical, resigned and each knew he might be the next malarial victim. There was a dreadful, horrifying, uncertainty about life. In England you can take care when stepping off the pavement, and reduce the number of unexpected deaths, but the Arab peasant is struck down by the fever of malaria no matter how much care he takes. In all the hamlets and villages the peasants were courteous, unselfish, kind and generous. By Western standards they were not always honest, but then, Western standards had no currency with them. These hapless folk were so simple that now and again they allowed a bogus "doctor" to leave a trail of misery behind him. The man was never caught. He toured the villages on horseback, charging a high fee to inject peasants against malaria. One day it was discovered that the injecting needle contained only air, and air injections are dangerous and can kill those patients who are not of strong constitution.

The best way to resist malarial fever is to eat plenty of good food and build up a strong constitution. The Akhterine villagers, 1700 in all, collectively owned some 3000 sheep and goats, yet they ate meat only at the spring slaughtering of the lambs, at Ramadan and at Bairam. One evening, accompanied by a Christian official, I rebuked many peasants at one of the village meeting-houses for not eating meat. They answered that the price of meat was too high. They sold their sheep and goats in Aleppo only when they got a high price, and if their price was not forthcoming they would not sell. Having sold some livestock they would go straight to the soukhs, exchange the cash for English sovereigns, return to the village and bury the gold in tins in the earth under their beds, where it was as useless to them as the soil it was buried

in. And they would go on eating their awful khubz and bourghoul, week in and week out, complaining they could not afford to kill a sheep because of the high price of meat. They filled their gold chests and left their stomachs empty. This was the main reason why their blood was too weak and poor to resist the germs of malaria.

Apart from the station staff, the gendarmes and the District Officer, only one man in my area was literate. He was a Turkoman, wore European clothes and sun helmet, and owned a large village some ten miles from Akhterine. He had a wife and adolescent children living in Aleppo, and a second wife and two infants living at his village. With the railway officials at Akhterine I spent many nights at the village house of this wealthy Turcoman. Dinner would begin at nine or ten o'clock with hors-d'œuvres and mastica, a kind of arak unflavoured with aniseed. The night was one long meal, dish succeeding dish at very irregular intervals, the eating and drinking punctuated with "neutral" propaganda from Radio Ankara and hilarious songs by our host. The dishes were always Turkish: small marrows stuffed with rice and mutton, aubergines stuffed with chopped meat and onion, boiled rice cooked in butter with chopped liver and raisins, chicken prepared in various ways, and large amounts of pimentoes, tomatoes, onions and chillies. Everyone present was expected to sing a song in his own language. A Syrian of Greek parentage sang in Greek, the station-master managed a folk-song in Armenian, a customs officer wailed a Bedouin love-song, and I, probing my arak-befuddled brain for a representative English song, could only think up some drinking tune. I said it was a folk-song, and everyone was interested to know that we too had our folk-songs.

Our host was a man of 65 who looked no more than 45, and was in the early stages of bringing up a second brood of children. He had lived one married life, closed the chapter, married again and was now well embarked on a second married career. He was still married to his first wife, but

remarked wistfully that she was not very useful to him any more. He derived his wealth from a large acreage of wheat cultivated for him by his villagers and from a vast fruit and vegetable garden that was irrigated by two deep chain-bucket wells. He had no cares or worries, for the Syrian estate owner has few taxes to pay and scarcely any forms to fill up. Our host was not ardently pro-British : his sentiments were with Turkey, and across the frontier he had many relatives. But he liked company, and being the only squire in a wide area he was only too glad to welcome us frontier people from Akhterine.

His was the only village whose land was not shared out under the *mash'a* system. He was sole proprietor and a feudal lord. All the other villages in the area were collectively owned and worked. Under this *mash'a* system each household in the village is allotted a different piece of land each year, the idea being that none is favoured by being able to keep the best slice of soil. Each family gets several acres to cultivate, but there is no inducement to take good care of the piece of land they will hold for only a year, since any work of a long-term nature expended on it will only benefit next year's tenants. There is no community spirit, no attempt at mutual help, no co-operation whatsoever ; it is each for himself and hang my neighbour. The whole countryside is thus in a permanently poor condition, badly ploughed, full of stones and weeds. The government does nothing to organise agriculture, and there is no scientific rotation of crops, no planning, no fertilising, nothing at all. The peasants — each on his own allotted piece — scratch over the soil with a primitive wooden plough, scatter the seeds, and let the winter rains and summer sun do the rest. In May, when the corn is golden, every single stalk over hundreds of square miles is hand-cut with a sickle. At this time I knew nothing of alleged Zionist designs on fertile Syria. I found out later, when working in Palestine, what it means to the progressive Jews to have to labour at transforming

barren soil into a rich verdant land while, not so very far away in Syria, the most fertile soil in the East lies in a condition of neglect and abandon. A handful of Jews and a dozen tractors would have transformed my area into a wealthy paradise. As it was, the Arab peasants were living just above the borderline of hunger, and though many of them possessed a hoard of gold, they may just as well have been without it. Four-sixths of the rich red steppe soil lay fallow, but the diminishing population could not cultivate it because it was against all religious tradition and custom to use machines. The Syrian steppes grow emptier year by year, whilst the Jewish population of Palestine is expanding fast. The day will come when Palestine will be overcrowded, and rich fertile Syria is practically empty.

## CHAPTER XX

### WHEN ARAB BLOOD IS ROUSED

AKHTERINE village was typical of the Arab countryside in that the peasants were sharply divided into two factions. Why they should be so divided and live in a permanent state of hostility was not an easy matter to probe. The only probable solution was given me by a visiting official, who was a Christian from Alexandretta and thus a dispassionate observer of village life. In his opinion the trouble at Akhterine started in the last century when a peasant of comparative wealth married a girl without any, and failed to pay her parents the marriage money. The two families quarrelled. At Akhterine "families" are large affairs, and include cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews. Indeed practically every family is interrelated with more than half the others. So when the families quarrelled over the non-payment of the marriage money, the village at once split into two large groups. Each side has harboured deep rancour against the other ever since. Every year a village war breaks out. It broke out one afternoon while I was there. A boy from one faction had spread the tale that a boy from the other clan had stolen some eggs. The latter, to get his own back, ambushed the other outside the village mosque and stuck a knife in his stomach. In about ten minutes the parents, brothers and sisters of the two boys were having a fight. In about one hour the whole village was at war. A pitched battle, with about 1200 participants, about 600 to a side, was taking place in the stone quarries between the village and the railway line. Women and children, as well as men, were in it. Rifles, pistols, scythes, knives, sticks, stones and boulders were used, and when ammunition ran out there was savage

hand-to-hand fighting. During the battle I was asked to send Indian soldiers to intervene and bring about a truce. I told the villager I could not risk the lives of Indian soldiers in a fight in which there were already killed and injured. The battle had nothing to do with the army or the British authorities in any way. Secondly, if I allowed the soldiers to intervene I would have been accused afterwards of having meddled in the internal affairs of Syria. Thirdly, sworn statements would have been made by the villagers that the soldiers had provoked the fighting. I had seen too many signed statements made by Moslems that were a complete distortion of the truth. I recalled that a sharp rebuke I had once made to a man I had arrested was described by him in his statement as : "The sergeant stuck his pistol in my stomach and threatened to shoot if I did not say 'Yes' ". I pointed out to the villager that Syria was now fully independent, and this implied that she was capable of maintaining internal order. To this he replied that the Government was far away in Damascus and could not know what was happening at Akhterine. I had to tell him that the local detachment of gendarmes was the government as far as he was concerned, and if they were unable to prevent the fighting in which the majority of the villagers were involved then everything was all right, since it was a democratic principle that majority rule should prevail. If the whole village wanted to fight, then let them, for such a method of settling disputes was quite within democratic principles. He was not very pleased with me.

Gendarme reinforcements arrived the same night from Aleppo, and all the village men fled into the surrounding countryside. The gendarmes promptly set about making hay, or whoopee, or whatever it is politely called, and let themselves loose on a village of married women, whom they also compelled to feed them. The dead were buried and the injured taken to the prison in the little town where the municipal doctor resided. I was surprised (but should not

have been) when some of the injured people came back to the village a few days later and went to bed to get cured without further medical attention. These returned peasants belonged to the more affluent faction of the village, for, by virtue of their owning some vegetable and fruit gardens they were slightly better off than those of the poorer faction. Being injured, these returned peasants were guilty of taking part in the fight, and should have stayed in prison, where they were getting free medical attention. I learned that they had bribed the municipal doctor to hand a statement to the prison authorities certifying them as fit to return home, where they could wait until the *gendarmerie* had completed their enquiries into the causes of the fighting. At the same time, these same injured villagers had bribed the municipal doctor to prepare a second statement certifying that all the injured men of the poorer faction were too seriously ill to be moved from the prison. Thus all the members of the richer faction went home, whilst all the poorer folk had to stay in gaol. The peasant mentality was such that those with a little more gold under their beds preferred to pay a bribe to be home, with the risk of dying from gangrene, to suffering the ignominy of remaining in prison with their slightly poorer antagonists, even though it meant free medical attention. When the returned peasants were told they were fools, the answer was one I might have expected : " It is Allah's wish that we come back home. If we die, we shall die, whether at home or in the kalaboosh."

A neighbouring hamlet with about twenty mud-brick shacks had a population of some fifty peasants who were too ill and feeble to cultivate more than a small portion of their village land, letting most of it run to waste. The owner was the moukhtar, who held the title deeds, which dated from the days of the Ottoman Empire. His clansmen were all his relatives, who produced just enough wheat and food for their barest needs. The place was utterly derelict, whilst the wretched peasants were as helpless as any I had seen.

One day a feudal lord of Aleppo, who owned land adjoining the hamlet, told the moukhtar he wanted the village land that was never cultivated. The moukhtar refused, so the feudal lord just took it, employing his own wretched peasants to plough up the land. Since the title deeds had not been altered since the Ottoman days, the moukhtar took up his case in the Turkish court, which gave him justice. But though the land, according to the deeds, was administered under the Ottoman Land Law, the Turkish court could not enforce its decision, since the land was now under French Mandate. Hearing that the Turkish court had given the moukhtar justice, and that he was now taking up his case in the Syrian courts, the feudal lord took swift action. He paid a bribe of 200 gold sovereigns (worth £1000 in Syria) to an officer to send a platoon of soldiers to demolish the shacks inhabited by the villagers, and turn the villagers out. The soldiers, Moslems all, did as they were ordered. It is a hard, but not an impossible, task, with crowbars and pickaxes, to pull down a score of shacks. It was winter, bitterly cold and snowing. The peasants were beaten up by the soldiers and turned out into the bleak winter steppe. They had nowhere to go, for neighbouring villagers would not shelter them. The miserable creatures were pushed about the steppe, in icy wind and quagmire, discovering with regret that Arab hospitality ceases when it becomes charity. By the time the spring came around, nine of them had died from hunger and exposure.

Since money talks and acts it was not difficult for the feudal lord to hush the whole affair. The moukhtar appealed to the Government through all the channels open to him. An order came for the malefactors to rebuild the shacks and reinstate the peasants. Money acted again, and the order was cancelled. The Minister of the Interior at Damascus was informed, and he issued an order that the wronged peasants be given justice. Yet again money acted, and his order was cancelled. He was also told that he had been mis-

informed about the whole affair. One conscientious government official who tried persistently to help the villagers was invited to dinner by the feudal lord. Said the latter to his guest : " My good friend, we know each other pretty well. Tell me why you persist in backing up these stupid peasants. You are a man of integrity, and I value your friendship, but are you not a little over-zealous in your duties ? You say I have stolen the land. Agreed, though I do not like such a harsh word. I hate to see good land lying waste, and under my control it will at least produce something. I am willing to employ the peasants whose stubbornness caused them to be ejected. In my employment they will be better off than ever they were. The Government has let the matter drop, implying that they tacitly agree with my action. And now I want you to let the matter drop. If you do not, you run the risk of losing your job as a government official. The whole affair is closed and finished with, and if you carry it any further you will regret it."

This happened in A.D. 1943 in Independent Republican Syria. I obtained the details of the case from authenticated records.

## CHAPTER XXI

### FRENCH ARMY CAMP

AUTUMN came to Akhterine, and French colonial soldiers with it. They took over from my good friends of the Trans-jordan Frontier Force, who were moving down to Palestine where trouble was brewing fast. There were to be no more Arab fantasias, songs and dances executed by these fine disciplined soldiers under British command. The platoon of Indians had been with me for several months, the T.J.F.F. squadron had been in the neighbourhood three months, and now there arrived soldiers under French command. The camp remained, and I remained : the French colonial soldiers swarmed in all around me. A French major and a captain came with the British Hirings Officer, found the camp in excellent condition and signed on the dotted line. The camp was now a French one. A whole Nissen hut was allotted to me, and I was to carry on as hitherto, except that I now had to live in a crowd of French colonial soldiers. These were to carry out all the duties hitherto done by the T.J.F.F.

A few days later the camp was like a pigsty ; the men were too lazy to walk the 100 yards to the latrines ; they littered the camp with all kinds of rubbish ; they brought back the flies ; they pestered me for cigarettes ; they asked for mepacrine anti-malarial tablets, for first-aid equipment, for tins of bully-beef (which they assumed I had, but did not have) and for propaganda literature. They walked uninvited into my hut, related their troubles and woes, spat on the floor, complained that they were underpaid and underfed, asked me to get them into the "British colonial army", showed me the patched rents and frayed edges of

their uniforms and cursed to high heaven France and the French.

I was beginning to get a little tired of Akhterine. I had had nearly a year of drinking well water, trying to read at night in the light of a candle, eating khubz and bourghoul, spending hours a week trying — but failing — to keep down the insect life, being unable to take a shower or even a cold plunge after tramping the dusty steppe or crawling over and under goods trains. Repeatedly my stock of food got riddled with teeming ants ; cockroaches, beetles and scorpions inhabited my spare clothing and bedding ; weekly I killed twenty to twenty-five bugs that I found crawling on me or my bedding. A soldier is expected to put up with all sorts of inconveniences without complaining, but when they persist month in and month out, the daily round of a monotonous life gets a little tedious. True, there were compensations in the dreary remote Akhterine life. I had plenty of Syrian company, and very often a Frenchman was there to share his meals and the daily routine with me, but when I most needed European company and a conversation on the things that make life in France so agreeable he would be absent for days at a time. Periods of depression were not even alleviated by an occasional day off in Aleppo. Though the company at Akhterine was cheerful and jovial it filled no wants in the soul of an Englishman. The men had no background of education or culture as we understand it, and their conversation was restricted to the things of immediate interest to their rough existence. I began to experience bewildering, fleeting moments during which everything about me seemed unreal. I wondered whether I was dreaming the Akhterine life, and when I threw up a stone and heard it rattle on the tin roof of my hut I put my queer thoughts down to a touch of the sun, and not to dreaming. I tortured my restless mind with green visions of the past : out in the steppe I could clearly see the tall dark cypresses of Bellagio reflected in the shimmering waters of Lake Como ; the brown dusty earth

became the green carpet of the cricket ground at Eindhoven, and instead of the rough track that led away from the station I could see a broad tree-lined highway in Picardy. I had come to hate the incessant sunshine.

For two days it had been overcast. Then one evening large wet drops began to patter on the roof of the hut. Rain ! The first rain for more than six months ! I leapt up with joy, went outside and walked about in it. Never was anything more welcome than those wet drops that fell on me. I inhaled deeply the fresh odour made by the rain on contact with the parched earth. It began to pour, and I went back to the hut to watch the storm from the doorway. Lightning ripped open the black sky, the thunder crashed and rolled away in rugged splendour. The storm spread across the steppe, and the lightning illuminated the flat plain and reached out to the distant Turkish mountains. The vast vault of the heavens raged and roared in a tumultuous fury, whilst the thick folds in the masses of clouds revealed themselves repeatedly. The torrent lashed down and hit the ground viciously.

It lasted nearly two hours. Then there was silence. Raindrops from the roof fell into quiet pools of water, and the feet of soldiers squelched through the sticky mud. Customs officials and soldiers came to life again, voice answered voice, and there was an unrestrained gladness in their hearts. Next morning the air smelled remarkably fresh. The staleness of summer had been swept away in one drenching downpour, and the sweet fragrance of freshness came over on the breeze. But the earth was dry again. It had been parched, cracked and powdered by six months of fierce ruthless sunshine. It had swallowed up all the rain, which had been drawn down to the thirsty depths. The surface, like a sheet of blotting-paper, was once more dry and dusty. There followed another week or two of fine hot weather before the rain came back. And then winter was almost upon us.

Everything at Akhterine seemed to go to pieces. Discipline and cleanliness had gone from the camp with the T.J.F.F. The French-paid soldiery made food-scrounging expeditions to the villages and incurred the hostility of the peasantry. The Syrian gendarmes at Akhterine incited the whole countryside against these Moslem soldiers in the pay of the French. My position became difficult, for my living in the same camp as these French Colonial Moslems branded me, in the eyes of the peasants, as one of them. I did not blame the soldiers for their hard drinking, for I was doing the same myself, but theirs was accompanied by much ribaldry, uncouth swearing and undisciplined behaviour. Still, I could understand their feelings, but one's feelings are less important than discipline. They fought amongst themselves, acted on the impulses of instinct, and paraded for their train duties shabby, unshaven and unwashed. With only two of them, a sergeant and a corporal, was I on good terms. They were good company, but had little authority over their men. Their Arab officer lived in Aleppo, and rarely came to see them. Railway passengers and staff alike deplored the departure of the T.J.F.F., who were a model of correctness and cleanliness. Just as the T.J.F.F. were an excellent advertisement for England, so were these Moslem soldiers a bad advertisement for France. It was not surprising that the Syrians were wishing the French to hell. To get tough soldiers in a tough colonial army you have — if you cannot apply discipline — to keep them on short pay and short rations, and compel them to live in primitive conditions, but a point is reached when such methods go beyond their purpose, and the result is a dirty disliked rabble. In the East the Western nations are judged by the conduct of the soldiers in the countries they occupy. None had the slightest respect for this rabble. A few months later, when I had been transferred to the frontier of Palestine down at the other end of Syria, the anti-French revolt took place. The peasants of the Akhterine district converged on the camp and besieged

the French soldiery. One could hardly expect them to do otherwise.

Meanwhile, my successor had arrived from Normandy, and I lived for a month in a room at Aleppo railway station before moving on to a village at the foot of the Alawite Mountains in western Syria.



## Part Three



### *CHAPTER XXII*

#### THE BRIDGE OF FLOWERS

PICTURESQUE places often have picturesque names. There was just a little of the elusive oriental romance about Jisr ech Choghour (the Bridge of Flowers). The mountains of the Alawite country form a broad barrier between the Mediterranean and the plains of Syria. Along the eastern base of these mountains flows the River Orontes. At the point where the Aleppo-Latakia road crosses the river is the very large village called the Bridge of Flowers. It nestles in terraces against the lowest slopes of the mountains. The waters of the Orontes nourish gardens, rich vegetation, poplar trees and vineyards. The bridge itself, of Chinese pattern, is of heavily-buttressed stonework, and zigzags across the river to enable it to resist the winter torrents. The Bridge of Flowers may once have been the Bridge of Silks, for it was on a main trading route from Central Asia to the Mediterranean and Rome.

At Jisr I joined another sergeant. He was not very busy, for things were quiet and the outlying villages waterlogged, but someone had discovered or decided that soldiers ought not to live alone at isolated places. They ought to be in pairs. I had grown to dislike Akhterine for various reasons, but as soon as I arrived at my new post I discovered that it had not been due to the lack of normal comforts. Jisr possessed a few rough cafés, which would give me all the social life I needed. I was too selfish to worry a great deal about showing consideration for another who was to share a billet with me. I found that I and my colleague had deep-rooted differences, conflicting opinions on many matters,

dissimilar methods of working and fads about food.

The billet was a mud shack like most of the others in the straggling overgrown village. It had an upstairs, where we lived, and a downstairs where none could live. The Residency (as one of our acquaintances called it) had a flat roof made of mud, and as it was winter and pouring with torrential rains several days a week, our bedroom was carpeted with old sacks which absorbed the water that dripped through. We had two other rooms, equally leaky and draughty, but the heating apparatus, when it worked, failed to keep our abode either dry or warm. Downstairs we had the luxury of a cold home-made shower-bath and a kitchen. One of our living-rooms was furnished, and though cold and damp, it was comfortable enough to receive our visitors in. They probably got a poor impression at the army not doing better for its representatives. We were on the list of the half-dozen subscribers to the civilian telephone service, which was still under French control, so that all our telephone conversations were listened to at the exchange by stooges in the pay of their chiefs. Of this we had not the slightest doubt. Semi-secret conversations had to be conducted in slang and veiled language, for the stooges spoke English and French. There was no electric light in this poetical town of some 8000 souls, and since our pressure lamps were always failing to work, we preferred to spend our evenings in the village cafés. It was better than sitting in candle-light in our greatcoats. On the whole, it was the kind of life I enjoyed, for I disliked unnecessary comfort, and I preferred to mix with the lower strata of village society, which one found in the cafés. I played tric-trac with café *habitues*, and was lucky enough to find at Jisr a Moslem lieutenant in the French Circassian regiment who was the only chess player in the place. I enjoyed nothing better than an evening over the chess board, sipping arak and nibbling at homus, olives, cheese, tabouli and sundry other dishes.

Activity was restricted owing to the mud-logged condi-

tion of most of our area. The tracks were a foot deep in mud. There was little to do in the town but listen. The Turkish frontier was a dozen miles away, and the soukhs of the town were well stocked with Turkish and German knick-knacks that came across it illicitly. Turkish smugglers came to Jisr in large numbers, but there were few suspects. Once a week my colleague and I stirred things up by taking a couple of gendarmes on a tour of the khans, of which there were no less than eight in the town. They were a permanent source of amusement and enjoyment.

The Turkish frontier was reached by travelling up a loosely metalled road running through country that was in turn wild, rocky, fertile, barren and wooded, all in a distance of some twelve miles. It was beautiful country. Not more than a couple of cars or lorries a day went up to the frontier village of Hatia. Since the cession by the French in 1939 of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, Jisr had been cut off from Antioch, and winter grass now grew on the road. There was much pack-animal traffic at night, bringing contraband down the road, but it was not the thing to go and ask the gendarmes, the customs or the forestry officers why they thought it flourished so magnificently. Without contraband Jisr would have become bankrupt, for it had no other source of income.

Of the town's 8000 inhabitants, 8000 were chronic malarial sufferers. I found on investigation after my arrival that there was a malaria case in every house in the town except ours. Our shack was in the Christian quarter, inhabited by about 2000 Greek Orthodox Arabs. The only obvious difference between them and the rest of the population was their religion. Few women, Moslem or Christian, wore the veil, and there was none of the religious fanaticism that compelled every woman at Idlib to go out with her face covered.

Our sitting-room looked across a narrow alley to the roofs of half a dozen houses. Between the rainstorms some of their occupants would busy themselves pushing heavy stone

rollers over their roofs. This was said to weld and knead the mud more tightly and solidly, and keep out the rain. On the nearest roof a beautiful, dusky and buxom wench frequently paraded. She had the peculiar habit, common to Christian Arab girls, of bending down, lifting her dress and pretending to pull up her stockings. What made Zubeida's habit so noticeable was that she never wore stockings. However, her manœuvres succeeded in their purpose, and attracted our attention. She made signs to us, and said simple, childish things, though she must have been at least eighteen years old. Her mother, we learned, had a dubious reputation, and entertained male visitors, who parked their pack animals in Zubeida's courtyard while they were occupied with her mother. Zubeida, by contrast, was said to be a girl of very fine character. Certainly, when she passed us in the street she did not know us, and walked by with her nose well elevated. The mystery of the Orient was written all over Jisr, but nowhere so plainly as on the house across the way, where widowed mother and daughter lived side by side at opposite ends of the moral scale.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LOST WORLD

THE deep mud of the river valley and the plains east of the Bridge of Flowers confined our movements to the mountains above the village and the hilly frontier country. We one day took a gendarme, as a guide, to a village in the Alawite Mountains. It was like a visit to another world. Leaving the truck by the roadside we tramped up through rocks, boulders and coarse scrub to a collection of shacks perched on a ledge far above. Through the drenching rain that poured down in straight lines we could see wisps of smoke rising from the compact untidy village. The nearest cultivated soil lay far below, and anything in the way of grain, fruit, stores or supplies that came from the outside world would have to be man-handled up through the rocks.

As we entered the village the peasants came out of their shacks and holes and stared heartily at us. The whole village, we were informed, was chronically sick with malarial fever, even up here in the mountain. Where there was not solid rock underfoot there was deep sticky mud. Poultry, sheep and goats passed in and out of the loosely built stone and mud shacks inhabited by the peasants. Without exception the wretched inhabitants were in a deplorable state of misery, dejection and abandon : they were past hope, resigned, their spirit utterly broken. One expects to find this sort of thing in the jungle, in China, but for a small country that had been under a European Mandate for twenty-two years the conditions everywhere were unbelievably bad. Said the moukhtar to us : "We are poor and short of food. The water is bad, and every winter everyone is sick. The people die fast. May Allah have compassion on us."

Centuries of in-breeding amongst the few families had produced cases of idiocy. A symptom of slow racial decay, idiocy is still rare in Syria, and insanity unknown. Compare this with the West. Our asylums are filled, not with the victims of racial decay, but with mental diseases peculiar to our own type of "civilisation". The moukhtar invited us to his house for a cup of coffee. He could have had little coffee to offer strangers, yet we could not refuse. A refusal would have been considered as a sign of hostility. Men and youths of the village followed us in, leaving their kub-kubs at the door. One did not have to ask if they had nothing else to do in the middle of the afternoon than squat on the floor and watch us. They were devoid of any desire or urge to do anything. They were living corpses. When we suggested to the moukhtar that he put all the men to work cleaning up the village, covering the patches of mud with stones, sealing up the stagnant well and repairing the houses, he answered that any work they did would bring them neither food nor money, so what object was there in working? At his request we visited a sick woman. The interior of the shack was remarkably clean and better furnished with mattresses and stools than most. The woman had a fever, and complained of severe internal pains. She was lying on a mattress and suffering terribly. From the description of the pains we gathered that she was suffering from cancer in an advanced state. The woman's eldest son, aged about 25, in a voice bordering on hysteria implored us to do something to save her. The woman was in acute agonies of pain, the disease had been totally neglected, and she would be better dead than suffering further. As English people, we were regarded as capable of performing miracles, yet we could do no more than report the case. Not a single week had passed since I had been in the country without my seeing an Arab suffering unnecessarily from fever, disease, torture, hunger or poverty. This was just another case.

On our way back the gendarme told us that in all his

experience he had never known a doctor go out voluntarily to do something to relieve the sufferings of the wretched peasants. He said that nothing would come of his reporting the case to the municipal doctor. A year or so earlier the peasants in that mountain village had voted and helped to elect their own parliament by putting their crosses against the name of one of the feudal gentry on the ballot paper. They might as well have traced their crosses in the village mud. The peasants will all be dead before the so-called democratic government does anything to relieve the sufferings of the suppressed classes. What surprises the observer is the Government's pompous claim to practice democratic principles. Yet instead of grappling with the problems that face the country, instead of ordering doctors out into the villages to save life, the Government orders anti-French demonstrations; instead of appropriating some of the disgusting wealth of the feudal lords in the shape of taxes, it demands a seat at the San Francisco Conference and at U.N.; instead of carrying out land reform, it clamours for a voice in international affairs.

In 1939 the road from the Bridge of Flowers to Antioch became one of the war's first refugee roads. When the Turks took the Sanjak of Alexandretta from Syria they chased out or persecuted the thousands of Christians, including Armenians, who lived there. England may have been looking the other way, and though the French must have seen what the Turks were doing they were far too preoccupied about Hitler to worry much about the plight of Syrian Christians fleeing from Turkish aggression. The Christians had to abandon their homes, farmsteads, orchards and property and flee south to Syria and the Lebanon. This aggression of Turkey's was the first step in the reconquest of a coveted part of the old Ottoman Empire. I know, as well as any, that the Turkish Government has always proclaimed its non-aggressive intentions and that its aim is merely to consolidate a strong Turkey within the limits

of the 1924-25 frontiers. Kemal Ataturk had no territorial ambitions. Nor has Ismet Inönü, the present ruler; nor had Mussolini; nor had Hitler. None of these people have aggressive intentions until they strike. I need not here discuss whether Turkey still covets further slices of Syria. In spite of U.N. the new post-war type of diplomacy is very successful. A strong power can manipulate oriental politics at will. What goes on in the Balkans, in Dalmatia, in Iran and Azerbaijan is apparently not U.N.'s business. Anything can happen between Turkey and Russia, both of them totalitarian powers. It is remarkable how many "independent" governments fall into step with Russia, and how many of them end up by finding themselves in the Russian sphere of "influence". We should not be surprised one day to see Turkey doing a *volte-face*, becoming suddenly pliable to Russian desires, surrendering the Dardanelles and getting something else in return.

The Jisr-Antioch road was an all-Syrian road until 1939. Now it stops at Hatia, a dozen miles north of Jisr, and grass grows between the stones. You can still go up to Hatia, the smuggling village on the frontier, and look across to see the Turkish flag flying on a fort on a large spur jutting into the ravine. It is beautiful country, green and wooded in winter and spring; broad valleys merge gracefully into the hills and mountains beyond. At Hatia the French had a small military post of Arab soldiers, which policed the frontier, collected information for the *Deuxième Bureau* and baksheesh for itself. The post dabbled heavily in smuggling. It is an Arab tradition for soldiers, customs officials and gendarmes entrusted with frontier control to practise precisely what they are there to suppress.

West of Hatia is a Moslem village owned by one Fayez Agha who showed us a generous hospitality we hardly deserved. The hamlet was on a huge spur in the mountains, and looked across a deep ravine to a mountain less than a mile away. The Turkish frontier was down in the ravine,

and the opposite mountain was inside Turkey. The house of the village chieftain, Favez, was open to us day or night. I have arrived there at ten o'clock at night and been received like a long-lost brother. Our host used to sense whether we were hungry, and could tell at a glance whether we had been two hours or twelve without a meal. It was an offence to say "No" when he had made up his mind about our appetite.

Favez Agha lived for his stomach. He spent much of his time in the kitchen directing his wife and servants, experimenting with some new dish or other. He would leave me and my colleague to twiddle the nobs of his radio set, excusing himself for an hour or more in the kitchen, assuring himself that every dish was a masterpiece. He grew and produced all the food and drink he consumed. He made even his own vinegar, by packing grapes tightly into a jar, leaving them for about six weeks, and then squeezing out the juice. His great speciality was fruits preserved in syrup. Cherries, quinces, peaches, apples, green walnuts, figs, plums and pears, all of them in sweet succulent syrup, would appear on the breakfast table. Breakfast, when I was there, ran to six or seven courses. There would be eggs that were cooked while swimming in semn   (liquid butter), white ewes' or goats' cheese, cold chicken or mutton, baklava (a variety of sugared pastry), green and black olives, ground almonds cooked in milk and sugar, fresh fruit in season, home-made jam that was eaten as we eat stewed fruit, fruit preserved in syrup, and other dishes I no longer remember. If we arrived after noon, our visit would be the pretext for a special occasion, for he would send out horsemen to notify his friends, who turned up for a really sumptuous feast of anything up to twenty-five or thirty dishes that would last from dusk till midnight. Large quantities of Favez's own arak would be drunk at these meals.

His hospitality did not stop at food. He would have the best beds prepared, with two or even three mattresses, eider-downs of rustling sheeny silk, and sheets as white as snow

and cold to the touch. I felt completely out of place in such a bed, for I was accustomed to sleeping anywhere, often in my clothes, often under the stars, in a pile of wheat, but never in such ultra-luxury. I was rarely clean enough, when I got to his house, to sleep in such delightfully fresh sheets. Fayezy Agha was never lavish with water, and one had to be content with a hand and face splash. Our host had had a house built just outside the hamlet, down in the valley on the slope of the spur away from the Turkish side, with a swimming pool (still empty) attached, and a green garden that was like an Eden, shady, leafy and — when we used to go there in the summer during our Idlib days — full of luscious fruits, flowers and perfumes. This garden, like his superb cuisine, proved that Fayezy had traces of that genius for the creation of the beautiful, which, during centuries of progressive decay, the attitude of resignation has destroyed in the Arab soul.

Like all Arabs, Fayezy dreaded loneliness, even for half an hour. When we turned up, no matter how late, his pleasure knew no bounds. He was not cultured, but he was entertaining, and could discourse on his version of Middle East affairs and on food all day long without being boring. He lacked the European gift for choosing suitable wines to go with the various dishes, and some of his efforts in this direction were atrocious. But since Arabs are not wine-drinkers by tradition or habit, this fault did not matter.

His politics were of the conservative and traditional type, and he regarded Britain as the corner-stone of Middle East politics. He belonged to the old Lawrence school, that placed its faith in Britain, and despite our broken pledges and promises, continued to look to Britain as the Arab saviour. He had no time for the new school of thought, which, under Egyptian leadership, is trying to lessen British influence, with the ultimate aim of throwing Britain out of the Middle East. He was deplorably unaware of, and refused to admit the existence of the international game, involving Russia, oil, Kurdistan, the Arab League, expansionist Zionism and a

resurgent Islam. For him, all these things were too remote and vague to upset the stability of the Arab world. Had I told him that Britain's influence would, rightly or wrongly, weaken still further, and be replaced by other influences, such as Zionism or Communism, he would have regarded me as deranged. He did not know that the Middle East is no longer the Middle East of Lawrence's day. Then, Britain, and later France, decided the future of Arab States. Now, other powers claim an interest in them, some of them for motives more dubious than those of Britain or France.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### ALIEN CREED

A FEW miles north of the Bridge of Flowers and only two miles from the frontier of Turkey at Hatia was a refuge and a haven of retreat from the Moslem environment. The village of Q'naye has 900 inhabitants, all of the Roman Catholic faith. It stands amongst cypresses, olives and vineyards on the side of a hill that slopes down to the rocky valley of the Orontes. In the heart of the village stands the Franciscan monastery and school. A visit to the monastery was like a visit to an oasis of the mind. Father Ibrahim, a bearded and venerable old gentleman who looked about 80 years of age, welcomed his visitors in a manner that suggested they were just the people he was waiting to see. He radiated from his person the very essence of religion. He was an Arab, his brain was unusually alert, and he spoke French, English and Arabic with ease and fluency. By monastic standards his study was more than simple ; it was cosy, homely, warm to the eyes and simply decorated with great refinement. The stone floor was covered with matting, etchings adorned the walls and for visitors there were wicker chairs. To avid eyes long accustomed to oriental interiors it was refreshingly modern.

Father Ibrahim's deep Western culture did not betray his Syrian nationality, and though isolated from the main stream of political thought, he was as aware as anyone of the current problems of both Europe and the Middle East. He was particularly anxious about Russian ideological penetration into the Moslem world, and was well informed on the Zionist problem. In spite of his grand old age, he expressed his thoughts with a lucidity and a fluency that were surprising.

And while he entertained his visitors with a vigorous exposition of true religion, he kept their glasses filled with a variety of wines and liqueurs produced by him and his fellows. Usually half a dozen glasses were placed in front of each guest, and each glass in turn would be filled to the brim with one of the local specialities.

Father Ibrahim spoke in parables in the traditional style of oriental speech, and his wisdom had a biblical stamp. Although he conversed on many topics and problems, one felt the impression that it all came out of the Bible. The parables of the Bible could not have originated anywhere but in the East.

There is a tendency in England to forget that Christianity is an alien creed, an oriental religion. It succeeded where it was first preached because it met the needs of an illiterate and impoverished oriental peasantry, the kind of peasantry British soldiers now look down upon as primitive and backward, and refer to as "dirty wogs". The temperament, character and ways of life of the biblical peoples were conditioned by precisely the same physical elements and environment that determine the lives of the Arabs of to-day. In the Orient Christianity is still the same religion that was preached in its original form. The unchanging living conditions of the oriental peasant have enabled him to remain close to the basic idea of the Christian religion. Thus, to-day, the oriental Christian is a true Christian, whilst the Moslem is also in many respects very much of a sound Christian, for Islam has embraced many sound Christian principles. It should be remembered that all Moslems accept much of the Old Testament and believe in the story of Christ and the Apostles. One therefore finds throughout the Orient much sound philosophy that springs directly from the Christian religion.

When Christianity first came to England it no doubt filled some of the spiritual wants of the illiterate peasantry. But it is a far call from early Christian England to the conditions of the present day. The conditions of life in modern England

do not permit the original Christianity to survive. It has been squeezed out. Our English Christianity has long since been stripped of its religion ; it has become a form, a rite, a habit, a mere carcase of a religion, with the carcase represented by the clergy and the empty stone churches. The substance of the religion itself has ceased to be. The people who are paid (or stipendiated ?) to minister to the spiritual needs of the public never give the impression that they are convinced about what they preach. They are not fighters for religion, and if it is true to say that a job worth doing is worth doing well, then these people are not doing a worthwhile job. The existence in contemporary England of empty churches, spiritual poverty and the highest crime incidence in her history is a sufficient testimony to the bankruptcy of religion. It was Father Ibrahim, on the fringe of the Turkish mountains in Western Asia, who brought home to me the true appearance of Christianity in England to-day. His whole life and speech had the sparkle of divinity. He practised the original Christianity.

## Part Four



### *CHAPTER XXV*

#### THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SUN

FEW countries are more beautiful than the Lebanon, the world's only Christian Arab State. A compact mountain mass separating the Mediterranean from the Syrian desert, the Lebanon in climate and scenery rivals the best in Europe. Silent, majestic mountain ranges lie under a mantle of snow for many months of the year ; laughing streams and torrents gurgle and foam down rocky gorges ; alpine flowers, quivering in the cold breezes, peep from amongst rocks and boulders ; the lower slopes are patched with the dark verdure of pine and fir, whilst an azure and shimmering sea ripples against a rocky coast dotted with orange and banana groves. And there is sunshine, mellow and golden in winter, silvery and tempered in summer ; sunshine that throws the enormous dark shadows of mountains across deep valleys, sunshine that glistens on the silent snows, sunshine that sparkles through the waving fronds of palms and fills the hearts of the Lebanese with joy.

It is not surprising that the Lebanese are a happy people. Light hearted and gay, betraying no cares or worries, gripped in a consuming craze for westernisation, they laugh at themselves, they make fun of their complicated religious problems, of their unstable politics and their dubious and capricious politicians. They are hardly conscious of their great history, of their Phoenician origin, of their Saracen and Crusader background, of a truly golden past. But they do know that their country is like a corner of Europe in a hostile oriental world, that the Lebanon is a moral bulwark of Europe on the extreme western fringe of Asia. They know that their country will be called upon to play a leading part in the

shaping of the future of the whole Middle East. The Lebanon is closely involved in many big questions — religion, oil, Zionism, great-power strategy and Pan-arabism. She has chosen the path of independence, a path with many pitfalls that she cannot successfully walk alone. The Middle East is on the eve of new upheavals. The Lebanon will play a role as important as that of Palestine or of Egypt.

After several weeks' idleness in Cairo I was glad to get the news that I was to go north again, this time to Tripoli, pipe-line terminus and oil port on the Lebanese coast. Tripoli is half ancient and half very modern, a glaring white town basking in the sun under the waving palms, dominated by great snow-covered mountain ranges, and washed by the sparkling blue Mediterranean. If one was seeking a paradise after the vast treeless and dust-laden plains of Syria, here it was. It was a return to a form of Western life. For the first time in about two years there was water running from taps, a European lavatory, electric lighting and a busy town of some 70,000 souls milling all around me. The comforts, hitherto unobtainable, included a shower bath, a radio set, tiled floors and five large sufficiently furnished rooms. In the cool leafy garden red and white roses were in bloom, and the fresh spring grass was a foot high. A fountain of cool water played in the shadow of trees, some of them still heavily laden with golden oranges and others covered with apricot blossom. There was no spadework to be done. Friends, contacts, routine and a cook were already there, and handed over to me by my predecessor. Many houses in the district were open to me, opulent houses and apartments richly adorned with Persian carpets, modern furniture and beautiful, unveiled Levantine women. There were some millionaires in the town, all of them jungle merchants and traders from the British colonies of West Africa, retired, at home on leave or, in some cases, stranded at home by the tide of war. They were investing their fortunes in property and building, and forcing up the prices.

Tripoli is still the Orient, but it is a vastly different orient from that of Syria. Syria looks eastwards ; the Lebanon turns its back on the East and faces westwards across the Mediterranean. Western influences in the Lebanon are strong, stronger than the oriental influences, and French penetration goes deep. French influence has left its cultural mark on the educational system, and a large percentage of the children of rich Moslems, as well as Christian children of all classes, attend the French schools and colleges established in the country.

Unlike the peasant serf of Syria, the Lebanese is politically conscious, and exhibits a passionate partisanship. Just before my arrival at Tripoli the Prime Minister, a native of the town, had been shot up in his car close to his home by the gunmen of one of his rivals. The Prime Minister, Abdul Keramé, was pro-British ; his assailant, a member of the Omary family, was pro-French. Political passion was also the cause of trouble when a party, attended by many leading notables, had ended in a shooting match between various guests. Politically speaking, Tripoli was not exactly a dull place. Political murder, gangsterism and racketeering were as common as they were in Chicago in the late twenties. Meat and fish brought fortunes to gangs of racketeers, who sent out bands of thugs to beat up dealers, merchants, shepherds and fishermen who tried to undercut the high prices they imposed.

Many religious sects and all shades of political opinion existed in the town, which was half Moslem, half Christian, half feudal and half pseudo-democratic. Alongside the modern hotels and Swiss-style *pâtisseries* were the mysterious soukhs, situated in a maze of narrow, dark alleyways, where men were often found dead, where all sorts of illegality thrived and bullets whizzed. It was a confused and complicated background, where Orient and Occident were inextricably mixed in a kind of life that belonged neither to the East nor the West. Out of the confusion emerged the

general trends ; the rackets crystallised themselves into large rival interests, whilst many unaccountable activities gradually clarified themselves as the details of large-scale corruption on the part of government officials came to light. Gendarmes and police had little to say in the rackets, and any meddlesomeness on their part was met by bands of thugs using force and firearms. In Syria racketeers operated with some discretion and had a certain amount of respect for the law, but at Tripoli things had got beyond that stage.

All the morning until lunch-time, and every evening at *apéritif* time, the cafés were full of men of all types, from those who counted their fortunes in millions of pounds sterling to the shabby, needy reporter-owners of weekly scandal-sheets, who for a handful of banknotes would publish slanderous and libellous attacks on gangsters and decent people alike. These reporter-owners kept alive the reputations their own gossip had created about local personalities. Anyone who disliked anyone else would bribe the owner of a weekly scandal-sheet to attack him, and since there was no law forbidding libel, there was no limit to the mud-flinging and slandering.

The irresponsible gossip soared to the regions of pure fantasy. The effendis, the soukh merchants, the easy-money boys and their hangers-on never let up. With studied deliberation and venomous tongues they would smear political mud over various personalities they did not like, and relate fulsome details about private lives, mingled with sensational revelations of anti-British activities. Anglo-French enmity was created by the gossips, the weekly crop of rumours providing ample proof that they had no basis of fact. Up in Syria the simple peasant had no knowledge of the world beyond his vision, and, thinking in biblical parables, could be excused his wild flights into fantasy. But the Tripoli gossipers were worldly, travelled men. Evil intent and viciousness were in all their thoughts.

It was widely assumed by many of my "friends" and callers that my mission at Tripoli was to foster and encourage

anti-French and anti-Russian feeling. One individual, in whom I corrected this impression, said : " But the British are not in the Lebanon for nothing. They are here to stay, and to throw out the French. Besides, we want the British to stay. We have never been so prosperous as we are now."

In spite of all the information and files left by my predecessor, the scene was confusing and complicated, and until I had obtained the feel of the place it was not safe to accept too many invitations. Had I allowed certain " friendly " elements, who were always giving me invitations, to be seen in public with me, I too would have been considered to be involved in their rackets. I decided to spend most of my time during the first few weeks roaming the countryside and mountains. There was as much of interest there as in the town, and the snow at the Cedars ski-slopes was an additional attraction.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### RED LEVANT

UP over the hills some dozen miles south-east of Tripoli is the El Koura basin, some fifteen miles by three. It is entirely covered with olive groves, and surrounded by hills and mountains. Villages peep from amongst the olives, while others cling to the slopes overlooking the basin. The villages are neat, clean and picturesque, inhabited by Greek Orthodox Christians. The scenery is of immense grandeur. From the western slopes of the basin the panorama across the sea of olive trees to the mountains behind is of rare beauty. The evening sun casts a glow of pink on the masses of snow on the great wall of mountains. For once mountains could be described as majestic. They were only ten miles away ; the highest peaks were nearly 11,000 feet high, and they looked impressive.

Day after day I cruised on my motor-cycle along the leafy lanes amongst the olive groves, halting at village cafés, calling on my predecessor's friends and meeting local dignitaries and government officials. Two villages on the western slopes of the basin, Bterram and Bir, were regular ports of call, for in them were old and genuine friends with whom my predecessors had kept permanent contact. There was always a bed and a meal for me at either of these villages. At Bterram lived the Malek family, cousins of the Lebanese Minister in Washington, who represented all that was best in Lebanese pro-British sentiment. They also represented the only stable and unchanging political element in Lebanese politics which called for a closer association with Britain and North America. The Maleks owned olive groves, practised a simple and traditional way of life, entertained

with a simple and easy hospitality, and had many cultural and intellectual interests. They were outside and held aloof from the political strife that kept the country in a state of ferment, though they deplored the growth of Communism in the El Koura district. They deplored it, not so much because it was a vicious creed, but because it served as a cloak for violent anti-British activities. Since the arrival in the El Koura basin of the 31st Indian Armoured Division, now housed in a score of large camps amongst the olive groves, communism and anti-British sentiment afflicted the peaceful countryside like a plague. People like the Maleks were seriously worried at the widespread and growing anti-British sentiment of the El Koura villagers. I had arrived at Tripoli when the orgies of anglophobia were at their worst.

The little village of Bir stands on the western rim of the basin. Eastwards from the village one looks down on the great sea of olive groves. Westwards there is an immense panorama of terraced slopes going right down to the rugged cliffs and the mirror-like sheet of water of the Mediterranean. My friends in this village so delightfully situated were the Greek Orthodox priest (khoury) and his family. On my first visit I did not have to introduce myself. At the sound of my motor-cycle, spluttering up the lane strewn with stones, the khoury came running out to meet me. "Hi'ya, Sarge," were his first words, "we've been expecting you ever since Sergeant E—— went away. You're sure welcome. Come right in."

Nothing about the Middle East surprised me any more. In the Orient anything can happen. I received a joyous and rousing welcome from this noisy and cheerful American family, whose conversation was alternately in Arabic and American. A gay, loud hilarity rang through the simple home of the bearded befrisked priest and his family. My visits to this house at Bir were special occasions for them and for another neighbouring family of Americans, who trooped in whenever I was there. The arak would be fetched out,

and there would be much drinking and conviviality. The two families were, by nationality, Lebanese, but they had lived a long time in the States, and though they had returned to settle down in their native country, they had retained all their American characteristics, above all, their speech.

There were nearly a score of Orthodox priests in the El Koura district, of which a few, like the Bir khoury, had returned from America. Their sentiments were naturally pro-Anglo-Saxon, and on this account the handful of American-speaking priests found themselves deeply involved in local politics. The Greek Orthodox Church of the Lebanon unofficially owes allegiance to the Orthodox Church of Russia. The Lebanese Patriarch had recently returned from a visit to Moscow, where he had been royally received by the Metropolitan Sergius and by political bosses of the communist party. This religious link with Russia had much to do with the growth of communism in the El Koura basin. The creed was even preached from the Orthodox pulpit, the only dissentients being the handful of khourys who had spent most of their lives in North America. All the other khourys were declaring themselves to be pro-Russian, and, by inference, anti-British. During the few weeks that I was acquainted with the khoury of Bir, he was summoned to the Patriarchal residence and warned to cease being a British agent. This summons, incidentally, came two days after the French *sous-délégué* at Tripoli had paid an official visit to the Patriarch. Because the Bir khoury was a friend of mine, he was regarded as a British agent, and he was requested to fall in line with the other khourys and preach pro-Russian sentiments from the pulpit. This he refused to do, and far from being a British agent he had nothing at all to do with politics, though he boasted that for sentimental reasons he preferred the society of Americans and Britons to that of Frenchmen and of communists. The last time I saw the khoury of Bir he told me that he was seriously contemplating going back to America. The political discrimination against

him, and the official requests from the highest Orthodox Church dignitaries to preach pro-Russian (and, by implication, anti-British) sentiments had decided him against continued residence in his native land.

It was not only spring in the air that brought added happiness and smiles to the pretty faces of the Lebanese lassies of the El Koura district. An Armoured Division was in occupation of the basin. This division had been wandering about the Middle East for three years, had twice been up to the Turkish frontier to shake up the Turks (so it had been mooted), and had missed going to Italy when General Smuts had insisted on sending the 6th South African Armoured Division in its stead. Now the division was in the kind of place that every soldier dreams about. Parked under the olive groves, the troops had opened a ski club in the mountains and a swimming club down on the Lebanese coast. And every village in the El Koura district was catering for the soldiers' needs. Night dives, cafés, secret brothels, pretty waitresses and night-club hags of every nationality — Egyptian, Turkish, Greek and Armenian in particular — appeared on the scene as if by magic. The soldiers had money to spend ; the villagers were growing rich.

Still more and new camps were being constructed, roads were being widened and a hundred and one jobs had become available for civilians. Thousands of the El Koura villagers were working for and living on the army. The job rackets were as open and widespread as in Egypt. The leading communists got themselves the best and least manual jobs as foremen, timekeepers, office clerks and unofficial interpreters. No villager could get a job unless he paid a £10 bribe to a communist foreman. The same foreman made the workmen pay a weekly retainer to keep their jobs. The foremen added the names of non-existent workmen to the pay-rolls and kept the pay for themselves ; they compelled workers to join the communist party with the threat of sacking them if they refused. The wily Levantine foremen, communists all,

twisted the unsuspecting British and Indian army officers and sergeants with whom they worked around their little fingers. Army cement, tyres, timber, uniforms, boots, shirts and all kinds of equipment vanished into thin air. The houses of communist foremen became stocked with these stolen goods. Poor peasants, suddenly become prominent communists, transformed and refurnished their homes as bars, secret brothels and cafés. The El Koura communists became rich ; they were feeding like locusts on the army. At the same time they carried on a violent anti-British campaign, and spread a vicious anti-British propaganda which periodically swept round the villages like a call to arms. Responsible people, such as the Maleks, were disgusted by this anti-British orgy, carried out by people who were rich as never before by virtue of theft, robbery and easy jobs so aptly provided by the presence of a division of British and Indian troops.

I had no anxieties myself about this form of communism. The El Koura communists were communists not by conviction but only by opportunity. As soon as the division went away there would be no more rackets, and it would no longer be fashionable or profitable to be a communist. The Lebanese idea of communism was hazy. I questioned dozens of people on Russian communism ; none knew even the most elementary points about it. These pseudo-communists had no sense of discipline and no self-respect. They were a common money-grabbing rabble.

Three events were largely responsible for the rapid growth of this form of communism. Firstly, the Levant States and Russia had recently, and for the first time, exchanged diplomatic representatives. The Russian Minister, M. Nicolai Solod, had recently arrived to take up his post in Beirut and Damascus. Within a few weeks a halo had grown about him, and in the eyes of Lebanese communists he was already as great a hero as Churchill. This may sound wholly fantastic, but I spoke with people who sincerely believed in this fabulous greatness of a minor diplomatic agent. Secondly,

Stalin had made a declaration that religious freedom had been fully restored in Russia ; it was a declaration that the Greek Orthodox communists did not fail to play up. Thirdly, the visit of the Lebanese Greek Orthodox Patriarch to the Metropolitan Sergius in Moscow, and his reception there, brought into the communist fold a large portion of the Orthodox Church's faithful flock. Whilst professing their communism, they still went to church.

At the same period conflicting statements were being put about in connection with the future of French and British troops in the Levant states. The uncertain political future of the Lebanon was having the same effect on its Christian Arab population as it was having on the Armenians. Local zealots, more French than the French and more British than the English, were busy putting out semi-official statements that the French and/or the British would never withdraw their troops, creating confusion in the simple Lebanese mind and giving the opportunity to the Greek Orthodox communists to plump for Russia. "Mr. Solod," said the latter, "has been sent here by Russia to look after the Christians. Let the French and British go. Russia will protect us from a resurgent Islam." Political sympathies followed the religious ones, and communist and Greek Orthodox became synonymous terms. Mr. Solod attended functions and visited many notables, and when the communists saw that he was not after all one of those picture-book bolshies, but rather a well-groomed and handsome young man, who lived in a fine house and was driven about the country in a luxurious car by a liveried chauffeur, their enthusiasm for Russia knew no limits. It became fashionable to say you were a communist. The administrative villages of Kusba and Amioun saw a manifold growth in the membership of the party. The communist leaders in these villages were on the crest of the wave, and the crowning event which let loose a drunken orgy of anti-British feeling was the spectacular Russian advance into East Prussia. These ignorant communists did not know

where East Prussia was, but the fact that the Russian armies had scored yet another success was enough for them. They organised demonstrations in the villages, in which slogan banners and giant portraits of Stalin were carried. These pro-Russian demonstrations were also anti-British orgies. "Out with the British", "Down with Britain", "The British Empire was saved at Stalingrad", "Britain is winning the war with Russian blood" were the more common slogans, some of them being written on posters stuck on village walls.

Many people associated the French with these demonstrations but I found no evidence myself. In Tripoli itself many Lebanese claiming to be pro-British came to me with fantastic stories of French money paying for the communist demonstrations. Moderation in politics is not a Lebanese virtue. There is no deep culture to provide mental and moral stability. The Lebanese are a volatile people, easily swayed and influenced; they are ready to believe any tale, and their vivid imagination adds decorative trimmings to the facts. Fortunately there was humour in their political passion. One day a French army lorry was used to deliver animal droppings to fertilise the garden of a French college at Tripoli. The incident provoked heated passion, tempered with humour, amongst the anglophiles. "So, you see, Sergeant," said one zealot to me, "while England and Russia are fighting the war, the French army delivers dung in Tripoli. Ça alors, ça, c'est un peu trop. Que les Français gardent leur merde pour les boches."

A very amusing friend was an eccentric gentleman of ample means who had made a small fortune in a British colony and had returned to the Lebanon in retirement. He had built a very fine home overlooking the town and the sea. Though he had passed the greater part of his adult life in colonial social circles, he remained, in outlook, a typical oriental. He was ambitious, and never ceased talking politics. One day he revealed his intentions with some candour.

“Why is it,” he asked, “that you British don’t back me up? Politically, I mean.” He explained, with some justification, that his long residence in a British colony had automatically black-listed him with the French — in his own country, at that. He felt it very bitterly that a foreign power in the Lebanon should place him on their political black-list and hamper his activities. What he told me was quite true. All my friends and contacts were on the French black-list. “It would pay the British,” said my friend, “to sponsor me at the next elections.” He said he had great influence locally, and could win over to the British cause all the so-called communists in the area. He asked me to intervene for him with the Chief Political Officer at army H.Q. I refused, suggesting that he should go ahead and win over the communists off his own bat, without depending on the British. He shrugged his shoulders, insisted on official British sponsorship, and revealed that he was on the point of carrying out alternative plans. My refusal to plead for him at H.Q. had now confirmed him in his intention to go through with them. The local communists, he told me, had already approached him and invited him to become their local leader. His conversation with me had already decided him to accept their offer. When I smiled at this revelation he added hastily, and in a manner of confidence, “Of course, I’m not a communist. But this district is bound to return a communist deputy at the next elections. See what a chance it gives me to get into Parliament.”

“But,” I said, “a wealthy man like you would never pursue a communistic policy once you got elected as a deputy.”

He laughed. “When I get into Parliament — as a communist — I shall have still greater prestige. The political colouring has no meaning these days. The Falangists, the green-shirts, the communists — they are all the same in the Lebanon. But I hate to see all these Abdul Kéramé and Ghosn people with important jobs in the Government whilst

I, who am as good as they, have to sit out here in my bungalow, abandoned by my British friends. Well . . . you've driven me into the communist fold, but it won't be difficult to reconcile communist principles with my own ideas of . . . of what I consider to be my own ideas. . . . You understand me ? ”

I did. It was just another case of oriental opportunism. He still hoped that the British would run after him and hold him back, and offer to sponsor him themselves, even unofficially. But, if not, then he was quite prepared to go to Parliament as a communist deputy. He knew his own fickle people. They changed political colour as easily and rapidly as a chameleon changes colour with its mood.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### GREEN LEVANT

AT Tripoli I was expected, on a motor-cycle that had been "bashed about" in the Western Desert, to reach places normally only accessible on foot. Stony wadis and mountain tracks were the only ways to many villages I had to visit. It was never with over-confidence that I made the journey up the mountain road from Tripoli to the ski-slopes at the Cedars. Thirty-three hairpin bends in less than two miles on a surface of loose running stones were not an inviting prospect for inexperienced drivers. At places the road was too rough and narrow for anything but animal traffic, yet somehow cars and trucks miraculously reached the snow, from sea-level to 7000 feet in about 45 miles.

Many parts of the Lebanon resemble parts of Switzerland. Roads run along ledges in the mountainside, with deep gorges below and perpendicular walls of rock rearing into the sky above. After Becharré, the last village before the Cedars, the track zigzags giddily up the perpendicular side of the mountain. One reaches the top very suddenly and runs in on to level ground, which gradually climbs towards the ski-ing slopes. I was stationed in the area during the spring, when there were four feet of snow on the lower ski-ing slopes, and about ten feet higher up, above the cluster of historical and venerable old cedar trees. The slopes are as fine and vast as any in Switzerland. It was not easy to find a plausible excuse to visit a place where many people were enjoying winter sports. All my journeys had to be logged as duty trips. I had to confess to these ski-ing expeditions when with a sun-tanned face I turned up once a fortnight for pay at my Beirut H.Q. To my envious colleagues in from their

isolated posts I feebly asserted that I had to go up to the mountains to look for hashish. One of them suggested I might bring him some peaches next time, provided, of course, the trees were not covered with snow.

I used the Palace Hotel at Becharré as my local H.Q. It was not so luxurious as its name suggests, for it was a ram-shackle affair, bits and pieces added together, but it had a fine outlook on the gorge below. Five Lebanese sisters ran the hotel on behalf of their absent parents. As successor to Sergeants C—— and E—— I was welcomed with a warmth for which I had to thank them. They had got things organised during their stay in the area. The hotel was mine.

The dirty Arab trains at Akhterine belonged to another world. It was a far cry from this hotel verandah looking across to a ridge of snow glistening under the ultra-violet rays to the Nissen hut in the bleak Syrian steppe lashed by a dust-laden gale. Instead of rough customs officers, Circassians and colonial soldiery bawling in French and Arabic, there were women — English service girls on leave from Egypt, jovial, laughing and sun-tanned, chattering in a tongue that rang strange in my ears. True, I spoke English with some of my Lebanese friends and with my colleagues when I went to H.Q., but the sound of English speech by people around me seemed unnatural after two years of Arabic, French and Turkish.

On the Becharré ledge, on terraced slopes near it, in the gorge below and in the vicinity of the other large mountain villages of Hadchit and Hasroun, there was much precious fertile soil. Every yard of this soil was essential to local agricultural economy for the cultivation of grain, fruit and vegetables, not only to meet the needs of the villagers themselves, but also to cater for thousands of winter and summer visitors who spent their holidays in this part of the mountains. At Becharré it was common knowledge that villagers and farmers had filled their precious soil with hashish seeds, instead of with the vegetables and grain so essential to their

very existence. Though it was only March the sun was hot, and the Becharré gorge, sheltered from the winds, for the next six months would be a sun valley. The hashish seeds were, apparently, already in the soil, taking the place of essential crops.

The owner of a large kitchen garden had instructed his two gardeners to plant the usual potatoes, onions, tomatoes, aubergines, spinach, melons, lettuce and so on. He needed these vegetables if he was to keep his boarding-house open. If you did not grow your own vegetables at Becharré you got none at all, unless you were lucky and wealthy enough to find some in Tripoli and lorry them up forty miles of mountain road every day. The two simple gardeners had planted hashish seeds instead of vegetables, saying they had been told to do it by the sergeant of the local gendarmerie, who had promised them half the proceeds from the sale of the grown plants and freedom from interference by the government or the military authorities. Since the planting of the seeds had been sanctioned and even recommended by the sergeant, the simple gardeners saw nothing wrong in it. Evidence was abundant, and informants plentiful, though I do not know what induced them to come to me. No less than 550 lb. of hashish seeds had been distributed amongst peasants and farmers in the three mountain villages. There would be an enormous crop of hashish in the summer, and for further confirmation I was told I could come back in May and see the stuff growing. What did vegetables matter when vast amounts of cash would be coming in for the hashish? By some means or other the villagers would obtain vegetables later in the year.

A vast organisation is required to distribute the seeds, cultivate the plant, prepare the drug and smuggle it to Egypt. It cannot be done without the active co-operation and participation of government officials, such as gendarmes, customs officers and frontier security officers. The anti-hashish drive was organised by the Lebanese Government,

and was given much publicity. The part played by the British Military Authorities was also widely advertised, and had, in 1943 and 1944, served somewhat as a deterrent to would-be growers and smugglers. The army supplied, in conjunction with the Lebanese gendarmerie, the destruction parties, which, acting on information supplied, located and destroyed the growing plant. The gendarmes were very often working hand in glove with the growers, who paid them bribes not to find out where the hashish was growing or to lead the British destruction parties to the wrong place. It often happened that the only hashish that got destroyed was in those cases where the growers refused to pay the gendarmes a hush bribe.

The plant itself is Indian hemp, which is cut down in the summer when it has reached a height of about six feet. When the plant is dry and the leaves are crisp it is ready for the preparation of the drug. The best quality hashish is produced in a closed room where the ceiling, walls and floor are covered and hung with white sheets or similar cloth. The plants are placed in a pile on the floor and beaten with heavy sticks. The fine powder which rises in the air settles on the sheets, and is afterwards scraped off with a knife into a container. This fine dust makes the very best hashish drug.

Whether by design or not, and whether it was my job to or not, I frequently came across cases of collusion between grower, dealer and smuggler on the one hand, and government officials on the other. It was always of interest to me in a personal sense to see how the new independent government of the Lebanon, at last freed of French control, ran itself. Back in Syria, before Independence finally began an uncertain career, we could ourselves destroy hashish; now, in the Lebanon, with Independence confirmed by the constant arrival of new diplomats from Russia, Egypt, Iraq, Belgium and other places, British destruction parties had to obtain the consent of the Government and be accompanied by gendarmes before they could go out and destroy hashish. Thus most of

it did not get destroyed. Hence one of the early benefits derived from Independence was more and more hashish for the rotting manhood of Egypt and more and more cash for the Lebanese peasant.

In 1944 and 1945 so much hashish was successfully cropped in Syria and the Lebanon that the price of the drug fell, causing anxiety both to growers and dealers. A smuggler once told me that the big dealers were delighted when the British authorities made a seizure of hashish, for the publicity given to the incident reminded the traffickers of the risks they were running and caused the price to soar again. An occasional seizure was the best thing that could happen for this illicit drug trade.

As a people, the Lebanese are happy, and are blessed with some of the good things of nature which we can only envy them. Compared to the industrial conditions of many European countries, their living conditions approach those of an earthly paradise. But they are without social morality or a sense of responsibility. They are a lazy, indolent and undiscriminating people, ready to abandon any principle in order to make a little ready cash. I do not deny that post-war England has sunk to a low level in this respect, but in the Lebanon there is no anchorage at all for moral principles, in spite of the widespread practice of simple basic Christianity. The Lebanese bitterly blame the French for neglecting to develop their tourist industry, since it might compete with France's metropolitan tourist traffic. These same people who throw the onus of an undeveloped tourist industry on to the French, having now achieved full independence, prefer to grow ready-cash hashish in their scarce mountain soil that is so badly needed for foodstuffs if their tourist trade is to develop at all. It is not for me to comment on the Lebanese accusation that the French, in twenty-two years of Mandatory rule, did nothing for Lebanese economy. I can, however, comment from personal experience on what the Lebanese are doing themselves for their own economy. Left to their own

resources, devoid of any drive or initiative, seeped in a system of corruption and bribery, they are doing nothing at all to advance from the point where the French left off. The Lebanon has no future under the Lebanese, unless it be a slothful continuance of drift and indifference. It needs more than twenty years of Mandatory control to remove the conditions and ways of thought acquired during hundreds of years of Ottoman influence. The Lebanese are showing themselves unwilling to do as much for themselves as they asked from the French.

I saw from experience that the two Levant governments, even with the help of the British army, took no really serious steps to stamp out hashish-growing and smuggling. As independent sovereign states they now have an obligation to the outside world to take responsible steps to prevent a deadly drug from leaving their territories. Almost the whole of the hashish consumed in the Middle East is grown in Syria and the Lebanon. Ruthless drug dealers would not hesitate to introduce hashish into Europe or other parts of the world if they found it to be a profitable enterprise.

## Part Five



### *CHAPTER XXVIII*

### BIBLE COUNTRY

THE war in Europe was drawing to its close. For us in the East, and especially for those like myself who had never seen any fighting, the approaching end was something of an anti-climax. We were right off the war map, high and dry, without a definite aim to stimulate interest. We felt we were not justifying our existence. I could always find or create work to keep myself busy, but the majority of soldiers in Syria and the Lebanon had reached a dangerous state of boredom and restiveness. The most difficult and urgent problem of the army authorities was to prevent the morale of the regimental soldier from sinking too low. The army did not expect the soldier to live like a saint, and it provided all sorts of palliatives, but even these could not smother the human instinct that tells every soldier that the only normal life is at home with wife and family.

For me Tripoli had begun promisingly, but I quickly grew tired of its artificiality and its complex intrigues. My wishful thinking was fulfilled when my successor arrived from Abadan, in the Gulf, to take over from me, and I received orders to report ten days later at Beirut H.Q. for a new job. The feeling of anti-climax and boredom at the prospect of many long months to serve after the armistice was suddenly driven away by a new and brief interest. History, I suddenly realised, was being made. A vast empire was going under ; a true Wagnerian twilight was enshrouding the death agonies of the Gods of Nazidom. It was an experience not to be missed, and I could watch it from the shores of the Mediterranean. I stayed indoors every evening and

devoured every word broadcast by the Berlin short-wave radio stations. Never before had the last words and thoughts of the leaders of an empire been broadcast to the world. During that dramatic week Berlin Radio scarcely referred to the war. The long talks and readings had a pronounced Wagnerian and Teutonic flavour. Past invasions (it was asserted) had not been able to deflect the German race from its path of destiny ; the German people always had and always would occupy the heaths, marshlands and plains whence the Teutonic knights had set forth on their conquests. Apology followed apology, intermingled with the consoling and inspiring thought that in the shadows the German race would survive, and would again emerge into the daylight. The German people were not enjoined to fight, resist and shed still more blood. Instead, they were transported into the future, whence they could look back on the great calamity as a mere incident in the annals of the German race. If ever a man knew his job and did it thoroughly it was Goebbels. Right at the end this fanatic, knowing he would not live more than a few days, had the vision and clarity of mind to administer to his people the soothing tonic he knew would be best for them. It mattered little that his monstrous régime had brought them to disaster. In calm, reasoned words the speakers passed on Goebbels' last series of messages, betraying no panic, anxiety or worry about the great calamity. It was an amazing performance, a fantastic gesture cunningly prepared to preserve the Nazi and Teutonic myths of invincibility.

Meanwhile at Tripoli the French and Lebanese forgot themselves in their selfish celebration orgies. Scarcely a Union Jack appeared alongside the thousands of cloth and paper flags of France and the Lebanon. Any stranger could have been excused for assuming that the German defeat was due to a joint Franco-Lebanese effort. There were bonfires and indiscriminate shooting, and stray bullets managed to find their way into bedrooms in a wealthy part of the town.

But the Lebanon's VE celebrations were not so much over Germany's defeat as in anticipation of the approaching end of all French "interference" in her affairs. The final winding-up of the French "affair" now became the main item on the political agenda.

Many Lebanese did, however, feel that their country's war effort justified the celebrations. But they lived so far from reality that they had no idea that their effort, compared with Britain's, was so little above nil as to be unnoticeable. They had not the slightest conception of the magnitude of Britain's life-or-death struggle on behalf of mankind. Throughout the war the Lebanon was a profiteer's paradise and a poor man's purgatory. The fabulous fortunes that were unscrupulously coined by men working in the public service would make fascinating reading, more like fiction than sober fact.

Merjayoun is a Christian village of some 6000 souls in south-east Lebanon. It is nearly 3000 feet above sea-level. To reach it you travel down the delightful coastal road, under the palms and through banana groves, to a point just past the ancient Phoenician city of Sidon, when you turn inland up into the brown barren hills. The village is tucked away in the interior in the folds of the mountains, and lies in the morning shadow of the great Mt. Hermon range. When I first went there I had to ask my way at a road junction without a sign-post. A young goat-herd, dressed in Arab clothes that were partly in rags, left his herd and ran down over the rough ground. Before I could get my question out he exclaimed, "Hi'ya, Sarge ! How d'ye like our l'il country, Sarge ? I sure wish I was in your army. But mebbe I'll get in the American army soon. I've gotta see an American doc in Beirut next month and get graded." Like two other Lebanon-Americans I met later, he hoped that enlistment in the U.S. Army would get him back to America. Meanwhile, his father had invested in profitable livestock.

I reached the village and found the billet. It was the

largest and newest house, a palatial residence and the property of a wealthy doctor who (I was not surprised to learn) was a leading communist and a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. The house was only half-finished, and had been built in reverse. Only the upstairs was completed. Building had stopped when in 1941 the British army invaded the Lebanon, and Merjayoun was in the battlefield for thirty-six days. There were seven beautifully tiled rooms, a spacious bathroom to which the water gravitated from a tank on the roof, and a covered balcony of enormous dimensions. The village had no electric light, and at night I was to move about the house with a pressure lamp that went out at crucial moments. Merjayoun was a Christian village, but had small communities of Druzes and Moslems. The Christians were of the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Maronite and Syrian Protestant faiths. Sentiment in the village was, if anything, pro-Jewish.

The billet stood on the crest of a hill, which provided superb views in every direction. To the east the Hermon range loomed up and dominated the intermediate landscape. It was near enough to enable one to distinguish with the naked eye villages perched high on its slopes. There was still much snow on the highest ridge. To the north, lower ranges of mountains rolled away in successive folds. Westwards, the pine-clad hill dropped sharply to the narrow gorge of the beautiful Litani River, beyond which the hills, diminishing in height, sloped down to the Mediterranean, which shimmered under the brilliant sun. To the south, six miles away, was the Promised Land, the hills of Bashan being clearly visible beyond the Huleh Valley. There were many places of interest within easy reach : Mt. Hermon, Dan, Caesarea Philippi, the sources of the Jordan, Lake Galilee, Mt. Canaan, Capernaum, Mt. Tabor, Safad, Kuneitra and many others. I was not sorry to have left Tripoli and find myself in the country of the Bible. Merjayoun itself is twice mentioned in the Books of Kings, having been the

site of battles between the Israelites and the Canaanites. Merjayoun — Merj Ijon — means the Plain of Ijon ; it is a freak of nature, a plain six miles by two, flat as a billiard table and surrounded by hills and mountains on all sides. The southern end of the plain is in Palestine, and on the frontier is a Jewish village called Metulla. Beyond Metulla the land falls away suddenly into the Huleh Valley, one of the world's worst malarious spots, where several Jewish settlements are working hard to reclaim the swamps.

The summer had arrived, five months of glorious sunshine lay ahead, and I was to reside in this mountain resort of Merjayoun, through which, every week, hundreds of Jews were reported to be passing, on their long-awaited return to the Land of Israel. The village was a centre of Zionist activity, sheltering many members of the underground movement organising the illegal entry of Jews into Palestine.

I stood on the balcony of my new billet, and gazed across to Mt. Hermon, the Mountain of the Transfiguration. The sun was setting. The great rocky mass of Hermon was drenched in a rosy hue, which was rapidly deepening to a rich crimson. As the sun sank into the sea far to the west, the shadow of the sea-line crept up the wall of the mountain. The pale sky above the mountain range was tinged with the pink, golden and green colours reflected from the western horizon, and presented a display of natural colours that one can never see in Western Europe.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### ERETZ ISRAEL

I SHARED the billet at Merjayoun with another sergeant, but I was to see him rarely more than once or twice a week. He spent much time roaming the lonely mountain area north of the village as far as Shtaura in the Beka'a Valley, and was having to match his wits with the French political and security officers. With trouble brewing in Syria, and the Mandate entering its closing stages, the French were making a desperate drive to revive and retain the affections of the Lebanese. One aspect of this drive was a clever and craftily executed propaganda campaign against the British. My colleague, and I too, were being discredited by the French : we were, according to them, nothing more than *agents provocateurs*, stirring up the Druzes and Arabs, and inciting the whole countryside to take up arms against the Mandatory Power. But more of this later.

Like my colleague, I was to use the billet only as a *pied-à-terre*. He was absent days at a time in the mountain villages. I looked in at the billet now and again when I felt tired. I was expected, as always, to cook my own meals, but I soon found that my work gave me no time to potter about in the kitchen. I paid the army's sanitary cleaner (who failed to keep the billet clean) extra money to prepare some of my meals. They were, however, total failures. Like his cleaning, his cooking was inefficient and shabby. He spoke fair English, and was more useful in other ways than either as cleaner or cook. Without much delay I decided to take many of my meals at the mess of the Palestine Police Station at the village of Metulla, which was a Jewish settlement. The station had a sergeant and a dozen British constables, a good

mess, a comfortable and clean lounge, electric light and many other advantages not available at Merjayoun. More than all else, I welcomed the company. The police were doing a job of work in the open air that only men could do. Theirs was a job without thanks or gratitude, either from Moslem or Zionist ; it required patience, tact, integrity, will-power and very sharp wits.

Metulla village is about six miles south of Merjayoun, and 100 years ahead of it. It has only a single street and less than 400 inhabitants, all Jews. Some of the small and old houses were destroyed when in 1941 the British army forced an entry into Vichy Lebanon through the village. There are a few large hotels and blocks of flats, which generate their own electric light. The village is the most northerly point in Palestine and is right on the Lebanese frontier. It was full of police, customs and immigration officials, all of them under British Administration. All illegal frontier traffic, whether goods, animals or human beings, therefore carefully avoided the village, and, instead, used the numerous camel tracks either side of it.

There are café terraces in the village street where, at *apéritif* time and in the cool of the evening, Jews, Arabs and officials sit under the awnings gossiping and doing their business. Young Jews and Jewesses, most of them on holiday, stroll up and down the only street, conversing in Hebrew, German, Hungarian, Russian and Arabic. Nearly 3000 feet above sea-level and standing between the mountains and the hot humid Huleh Valley, Metulla is a summer resort and a place of pilgrimage. Every day during the summer I spent there, bus-loads of Jewish children and adolescents, all of them in shorts, many of them dusky, others as fair as Norwegians, included a few hours at Metulla in a rapid tour of escape from the furnace-like heat of Haifa and Tel Aviv. For these healthy young people, bare-legged, wearing cloth bonnets and with haversacks slung over their shoulders, the journey to Metulla was also a pilgrimage to the

northern limit of the Land of Israel. On their descent from the bus they would stream down the sloping village street in the direction of the Merjayoun plain beyond it, bend under the frontier barrier and step into Lebanese territory. Then they would go to a point of vantage and gaze longingly in the direction of Mt. Hermon, the sacred mountain of Jewry. This was a peculiar rite that was performed by every bus-load of young people I saw arrive at the village. These young people, proclaiming themselves the builders of a new country, carried with them an air of superiority and purpose, looked radiantly happy and full of self-confidence. They regarded with amusement the Lebanese Arab women and girls, dressed in their frilled trousers and long frocks, who came to the village every day to work as servants and chambermaids in the Jewish hotels.

In the evening twilight when Palestinian *apéritifs*, beers and brandies were being served, when the awnings and trees were rustled by sudden gusts of cool wind, the soft lilting airs of Viennese waltzes came from inside the hotels and cafés. Here was a European atmosphere on an oriental background in an oriental climate; here at last was bright and intellectual European company. Metulla filled many wants in the soul of the wandering Englishman. The Jewish barmaids and waitresses in their idle moments studied French literature, socialism and economics. On Saturday evening, when the Sabbath was over, they joined the guests in the informal dances. There was a buoyancy and a vitality about life in the village that I had not encountered anywhere in the Levant states. Yet underneath it all one sensed a self-conscious effort to force the tempo of living. I soon found myself involved in vigorous conversational duels at Metulla, for the Jew of Palestine loves to debate his problems and intellectual subjects. For two years Arabs had agreed with every opinion I had expressed, for they had neither the mental vigour nor the cultural background to sustain a discussion, and rather than betray their ignorance, especially if it con-

cerned European affairs, they preferred to be always in agreement. The Jews were vastly different. They thrashed things out in long discussion and if they did not agree they plainly said so.

A Rothschild founded the Metulla settlement in the 1880s; the original inhabitants were emigrants from Russia. In the course of time the colonists, by their sweat and toil, had repaid the land on which they had been settled and had come into full ownership of it. To-day every adult male of the village has a share in the collective property, which he can sell out if he wishes to go away. The large fruit orchards, which are in the Merjayoun plain and partly in the Lebanon, produce enormous quantities of apples, peaches, apricots and grapes: these crops are sold *en bloc* to fruit dealers in Haifa and Tel Aviv. The wheat harvest is also large, and is sold, by law, to the Government of Palestine, which ensures a fair distribution of grain. Metulla Jews also own hundreds of head of cattle which provide, thanks to scientific feeding, a yield of milk superior in quantity and grade to anything achieved by Arabs in the Middle East. The village is a profitable concern and yields a very high *per capita* return to the small community. Much of the more manual labour is performed by Metwali Moslem men and women, who cross from the Lebanon every day to work for their Jewish employers. These Arabs earn about £3 a month, whilst Jewish labour costs four times as much. The Jewish hotel and restaurant manageresses spoke good Arabic and had a way of getting keen and willing work out of the Arab servants, who, as I often saw, went about their tasks smiling and singing, happy as they could wish to be.

I have often seen in the English press articles saying that the Palestine problem would be solved if only Arabs and Jews would agree to live peacefully side by side. But they do live peacefully side by side. I was soon to find this out from my daily incursions into Palestine. In the pre-war troubles some 5000 Arab bandits seeking loot used to attack

Jewish colonies, but the bulk of the Arabs merely went on strike and left the Jews alone. I was to roam about the Palestine countryside for about eight months, and never once did I meet with anything but friendliness between them. This state of peace may have been due to orders from the political leaders of both peoples, but the fact was there for all to see: Arab-Jewish peace. I came across not a single dispute between Arab and Jew. I did not do a Cook's tour: I nosed around according to my fancy and saw much that others miss. The problem that is emphasised in the English press does not, at present, exist. Englishmen who offer lofty advice to others could well apply it to themselves. There are more good manners, friendliness and cordiality between an Arab and a Jewish village two miles apart than between two English villages two miles apart. In England, where the press and radio render independent thinking ever more difficult, the insular inhabitant must necessarily draw most of his scant knowledge of the outside world from his penny *Views*-paper. It is just that "freedom" of the press that smothers and conceals the true facts. Freedom of the press means freedom to mislead the public, freedom to withhold facts, freedom to publish only half the truth, freedom to leave out important news, freedom to emphasise unimportant news, freedom to be biased and unfairly critical, freedom to regard and treat the public as a mass of nitwits. The press conception of "freedom of the press" is such that it is not surprising that the public remains in a state of confusion over many problems, especially that of Palestine.

On a high plane there exists an Arab-Zionist problem, and their long-term policies are in direct conflict, but in the daily life of the country there is none. Arabs and Jews do not only live peacefully side by side. There has always been much inter-marriage. There are in Palestine thousands of Arabs with Jewish blood in their veins, and during my travels I met with, in educated circles, successful Arab-Jewish marriages, not to mention a few Jewesses unmarried to

Arabs. The Arab does not object to the Jew as such. He has proved this by the manner in which he has lived side by side with the oriental Jew for many centuries. The Arab objects to the Zionist from Europe. The conflict is between Islam and Zionism, not between Arab and Jew. As soon as we English understand this the solution of the problem becomes obviously easy. I have deliberately tried to incite many intelligent Arabs to talk against the Jews. They would not, because they have not got a case against them. They dislike the English far more than the Jews. But the intelligent Arab will talk violently against Zionism because it spells another form of European domination. England had to fight the Germans to destroy Nazism, and the Arabs say they will have to fight the Jews to destroy Zionism. The Arabs have very strong and sound reasons for fighting Zionism.

The Jews have introduced into Palestine a Western way of life of which many aspects, regarded as normal by us and the Jews, cause deep wounds to Arab sensibilities.

Nothing is more offensive to Arabs than the sight of young women dressed in shorts and tight-fitting clothes, and displaying their arms and legs. It is the worst form of indecency. The Arabs are also very touchy about the mingling of the sexes in public. If an Arab speaks to a woman in public it is because he cannot avoid it. For him, women have no place in public and social life except as servants, and must be addressed accordingly.

The Jews, like everyone else, have a right to live as they like, but if their European way of living shows no regard for Arab sensibilities, the Arabs are bound to show deep resentment. In the West the public is protected by the law against indecency, but the Arabs have no redress, and must either suffer in silence, or keep away from all parts of Palestine where Jewesses might enter their range of vision. We might say they are narrow-minded and squeamish. But are not we squeamish over, say, bigamy? Of course we are,

and the defaulters, when caught, are punished. The Arabs do not tell us we are narrow-minded over bigamy, but we ask them not to be so touchy over what they regard as Jewish "indecencies". If we are entitled to our sensibilities, the Arabs are entitled to theirs. This question of sensibilities is at the core of the Arab-Jewish problem.

But let us forget sensibilities for a moment, and look at other aspects of Jewish civilisation in Palestine. At Metulla I came across for the first time people who were working not so much for themselves as for the whole community. The Jewish agricultural worker is consciously labouring for the benefit of all his fellows. He does not depend, like the Arab peasant, on the whims and generosity of a feudal landlord. Nor does he depend, like the worker in the West, on prosperous conditions to keep him in employment. His abilities are not for sale on the labour market for a weekly cash payment. He is creating something out of nothing, wringing food and wealth from a barren soil. He reaps the benefit mainly as a member of the community which grows more prosperous as a result of his efforts.

If the Jewish agriculturist got no more than a wage for supervising an electric incubator holding 24,000 eggs, or managing the irrigation of 5,000 dunams of soil, he might as well remain in Europe as a worker in some luxury trade. He is in Palestine not to earn a living, but to create a new country and a new civilisation, where unselfishness and co-operation are the basic characteristics.

Unfortunately this spirit of unselfishness and mutual help is not in great evidence where the Arab community is affected.

A policeman gave me what he called the "low-down" on certain aspects of the Jewish community. The N.M.O. (National Military Organisation = Irgun Zvai Leumi) had their spies in every Jewish village. If one did not want to get on the N.M.O. blacklist of "enemies" of Zionism, like some British officials did, then one was advised to tread with care. You have to work with civilians in the Orient to realise how

interested they are in your movements. You could not move 50 yards without someone taking due mental note and drawing conclusions. But I was used to that sort of thing.

I soon got to know many local people, especially hoteliers and waiters and shopkeepers. A few people had Haganah or N.M.O. written all over them. They held much furtive conversation with Arabs from across the frontier in the Lebanon. One waiter was a Yemenite Jew, and another was an Iraqi or Baghdadi Jew, and both therefore used Arabic as their mother-tongue. I could safely assume right away that those two waiters did not work in a little frontier village because they liked it. I asked an hotel waitress how long she had been at Metulla. "Three years," was the answer. I remarked that she must therefore know everybody in the place. She hesitated a second or two, and then said, "No. Not at all. I keep to myself." I said that I admired the little Yemenite waiter next to Brenner's, who found time even during the busiest meals to stick his nose into economic literature. In reply she said, "If you're fishing for information about him, don't ask me. I said I don't know anybody here." So that, apparently, was the situation. Silence. The Jews, unlike the Arabs, were security-minded. From an Arab you can get a rambling life-history, and more besides, about a character. The Jews knew which questions to ignore. By the next midday everyone at the village would know I had been pumping for information about the Yemenite waiter. He did not interest me, but my asking a few questions would not surprise the shrewd Jews. I, on the other hand, had unmistakably perceived the feel of the place.

In spite of being an outsider I was well received in the cafés and restaurants, was able to buy all the chocolate I wanted at the shops, and had many favours and kindly, if minor, services rendered me by the Metulla villagers. But they proved their watchfulness one day after I had spent the previous night talking with some Jewish people detained in Merjayoun gaol. The news of my possible participation in

the detention of a number of Jews just inside the Lebanon had travelled fast to Metulla. I came down to the village for my morning beer and found I was being boycotted. I could get no beer, nor chocolate from Belsky's grocery store ; I was politely told at the Hermon Hotel that no lunches were available, and I could not buy even a copy of the *Palestine Post*. The childish game went on for about a week, after which the warning measures were relaxed.

I visited most of the settlements in the area between Metulla and Lake Galilee, in particular those in the Huleh Valley. Already I knew that Kafr Giladi and the Ussishkin settlements were important reception stations for illegal immigrants from the Lebanon. During my first few days in the area the Dan colonists sent out a party of men to guide an expected group of immigrants into the colony. A police patrol from Metulla tried to intercept the immigrants, but the colonists' reception party turned their tommy-guns on the police. The police returned the fire, but the immigrants got into the settlement, where they immediately became Palestinian subjects by virtue of being handed, on arrival, perfectly bona-fide identity cards. A mysterious official silence followed this armed attack by "peaceful" colonists.

Kafr Giladi is the most typical of Jewish settlements. At midsummer it stands like an oasis in the brown parched north-west corner of the Huleh Valley. It stands on a large rounded hill, which is like an enormous inverted basin. The verdant slopes and the flat colony lands below them are thickly planted with poplars and eucalyptus, and the white and red bungalows of the colony peep from the trees. The main road skirts the colony lands, where at all hours of the day many Jews and Jewesses could be seen driving tractors, tilling the soil and tending the crops. A more peaceful, fruitful and industrious scene it would be hard to find. The workers seemed to have not a care in the world other than to extract the maximum of wealth from their soil. Yet amidst all this peace I have seen in the inner grounds of the

settlement, watching from a hidden point, boys and girls in their early adolescence being put through their military paces, training with rifles and tommy-guns and undergoing disciplined drill.

One morning an Arab constable saw a large body of illegal immigrants cross the frontier from the Lebanon, guided by five Arab peasants, and make their way in the direction of the Kafr Giladi settlement. He warned two British officers of the Transjordan Frontier Force squadron stationed at Metulla. The officers were near by and went to have a chat with the immigrants, but already the colony workers had formed a protective barrier around the new arrivals. The colonists were armed with batons, and being very numerous they attacked the two British officers, and damaged their car. Later, when a T.J.F.F. squadron of Arab soldiers arrived on the scene, the immigrants were already inside the settlement. Hundreds of Jews from other colonies in the Huleh Valley soon began arriving in lorries, cars, on horses and bicycles. They were all armed with long thick batons. The T.J.F.F. soldiers had formed a cordon round the settlement buildings, and the Jewish reinforcements at once attacked them. It was not long before the Jews outnumbered the Arab soldiers by about ten to one, and they fought to wrest the soldiers' rifles from them. The Jews were so close, threatening to overcome the soldiers' resistance, that a sergeant gave the order for a few harmless rounds to be fired. Seven Jews were slightly injured, but in a couple of minutes all the Jewish aggressors had disappeared into the colony buildings.

Then came the order from High-Up for the T.J.F.F. soldiers to be withdrawn and confined to their camp. High police officials arrived at the settlement to parley about the immigrants. The latter had in the meantime been whisked away into the interior of Palestine. The Jews had won their point, for the immigrants were in the country, well hidden, and could no longer be turned out. The moukhtar of the

Jewish colony refused to give any information to the police about the immigrants. Little more was heard of the affair.

Several points strike the observer. Had the T.J.F.F. soldiers not been withdrawn the immigrants could not have got away from the colony. The military authorities at Haifa had given the order for the T.J.F.F. to be withdrawn from the colony because, it was said, it was undesirable that trouble should break out between Jews and Arabs. The presence of British-controlled Arab soldiers at a Jewish settlement might be resented by Jews throughout Palestine, and trouble might spread. Yet the T.J.F.F. squadron at Metulla was there precisely for the job that it had been carrying out that morning. It was there to patrol the frontier and, amongst other duties, to prevent illegal Jewish immigration. As soon as it became involved in an incident with immigrants the Jews complained to the Government, which bowed to their requests. The second point is that the determined and organised Jews, flouting the immigration laws they do not recognise, had easily got the better of the Palestine Government. Thirdly, the immigrants were neither homeless nor starving, but were oriental Jews who had for the most part been tricked into going to Palestine to serve political Zionism. Fourthly, the Arabs did not fail to notice the questionable attitude of the Government in allowing the Jews to get away with it. That Arab guides had helped the Jews in was quite beside the point. That was no excuse for the dubious attitude of the Government. The latter point was important, for such incidents were being repeated regularly, and the Arabs were accusing the Government of conniving with the Zionists in the immigration traffic. I investigated the whole incident on the spot the same day and could see, as well as any Arab, that the illegal immigrants could have been dealt with in accordance with the provisions of the immigration laws. Instead, they were allowed to be absorbed, unrecorded and unregistered by the authorities, into the Jewish community of the country. The law had become a complete

farce. But the Arabs made a note of all that took place, and registered a slightly stronger hostility towards the British. We were getting not the slightest gratitude from the Jews in dealing with them so generously, and we were incurring an increasing enmity on the part of the Arabs.

### CHAPTER XXX

## FRENCH BLUNDERING

AT least 90 per cent of the traffic between Palestine and the Lebanon was illegal, and it ranged from vegetables to human beings. Traffic moved in both directions, nearly always under cover of night, and included anything that fetched a fair profit. The total personnel employed to control and prevent this illicit traffic was far higher than the number of smugglers. On the Palestine side were the Palestinian Customs, the Arab Legion and the Palestine Police ; on the Lebanese side were the French-controlled Customs service, the gendarmerie, French Security Officers and a company of the French-controlled Arab Special Troops. The Trans-jordan Frontier Force, in camp adjoining Metulla village, operated on both sides of the frontier. My own precise functions were secret, but it was apparent to all that I had some kind of roving commission, and that I worked in close co-operation with the Arab Legion, the T.J.F.F., the Palestine Police and with one Karam Effendi, a Lebanese Security Officer.

I made it my business to become personally acquainted with every Lebanese frontier official in my extensive area. I came to know them all, from the lowest-graded customs official to the Governor of the Province at Sidon. They were all delightful people, warm-hearted, worldly-wise, *débrouillard*, highly civilised in their manners and personal contacts, and extremely courteous. Apart from four or five conscientious men who were against the system of bribery and baksheesh, they were all up to their necks in it. For frontier security and contraband control they were as useless as boundary pillars : more so, since they collected handsome bribes for

helping the rackets along. I spent many entertaining days and nights with them at their lonely frontier posts (located a mile or so from the corresponding Palestinian posts), discussing such things as Zionism, European Imperialism, the Arab League, the Germans and their own private troubles. They affected a certain surprise at my constant pro-French propaganda, and they soon abandoned their reserve when I pretended not to be too interested in their corrupt activities. They knew I could get no action taken against them. But occasionally they were somewhat embarrassed by my presence, when by day as well as by night doubtful characters would arrive with loaded camels and donkeys demanding that the frontier barrier across the road be opened to let them pass. Mutual hostility would be smoothed out in a private talk around the corner, and then the goods would cross the frontier unexamined. I doubt whether the customs officials at the frontier posts ever knew what I was up to, for I had no set routine or hours, and I must have given the impression I was having one long holiday. Nor did they seem to care much what I was doing.

I did learn that they systematically reported all my movements to their French masters, and instructed peasants to watch all the movements of the T.J.F.F. patrols, which were reported to Jew-traffickers, smugglers and the French Political Officer at Merjayoun. On the whole, it was quite an amusing game of hide-and-seek, but underneath this game there was the more serious matter of British wits versus French wits, and our constant vigil on the effects of anti-British propaganda by the French. One may ask why the French should have carried on so much violent anti-British propaganda. I do not know. But it was there, it went on the whole time, and I met with it at every turn.

Since the Arab Legion was the private army of Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, its patrols could not enter Lebanese territory, but as they operated in an area of Palestine some thirty miles from Merjayoun their activities did not greatly

interest the French. It was pathetic to see such excellent soldiers and horsemen formed into a mechanised squadron. Their patrolling activities were restricted because 50 per cent of their vehicles — so they told me — were always laid up under repair. In wheeled vehicles these men were entirely out of their element. The Legion lacks the legendary glamour of Arab armies in the first German war, yet the pro-British sentiment was as fanatical as ever. This is remarkable when one takes into account the extensive concessions Britain has made to Zionism in Palestine in callous defiance of sacred promises to the Arabs. To the Legionary the word "Zionist" was like a red rag to a bull : he will die fighting rather than see a Jewish State set up in his country. To him Palestine is a Moslem Arab country nearly as old as Islam itself. The Legionaries were on very friendly terms with Jewish colonists who lived in their patrolling area, but let any Jew talk about Zionism or encroach on a yard of soil that still belonged to an Arab, then they were at once in fighting mettle, ready to regard Jewish life cheaply.

The T.J.F.F., though camped just inside Palestine, were constantly at loggerheads with the French Political Officer at Merjayoun. The T.J.F.F. had permission to patrol inside Lebanese territory to a depth of 10 km. The French regarded this frontier belt as sacrosanct French territory and a French preserve, which was being quite unnecessarily patrolled by the British-controlled T.J.F.F. Rarely a week went by without the French Political Officer having some complaint or other to make about them. Stories got around that the T.J.F.F. were recruiting and enticing Lebanese villagers into Palestine, running cross-frontier rackets, beating up Lebanese peasants who refused to pay them bribes, ravaging and looting Lebanese homes, conducting anti-French propaganda, inciting the peasants to take up arms against the French and issuing rifles for the purpose. These rumours were in constant circulation and never relaxed. They were being very adroitly put around by French agents. Across

in Syria anti-French feeling was rising in a crescendo. From the very start my relations with the French Political and Security Officers were strained, though I managed to maintain a lukewarm cordiality. They were practically unapproachable. They regarded me as a mischief-maker, whilst my colleague, who worked in the interior and had nothing to do with the frontier was, in French eyes, plotting openly for an Arab revolt against the French authority. I knew that I was under constant French surveillance, and that all my contacts, friends and movements were being reported to the Political Officer. I was not disturbed at knowing this, since I had no anti-French activities on my conscience. I disappointed many fervent anglophilic Lebanese by unceasingly professing pro-French sentiments. Furthermore, I had orders from my H.Q. to maintain good relations with the French officers, and to avoid trouble at any British cost.

Then came the anti-French revolt in Syria, which resulted in the French shelling Damascus, an act more stupid and foolhardy than any the world had seen for many a year. To justify their action the French put it out that the British had incited the Syrians to revolt. Anti-French sentiment at Merjayoun rose to an ugly pitch, and the French-paid soldiers at the local garrison dug trenches and threw up barricades. In spite of the local anti-French sentiment, anti-British posters appeared on the village walls. Those in Arabic had apparently been stuck up by communists at the instigation of the French. A whispering campaign went around the countryside that the British were about to "take over" Syria and the Lebanon for themselves. The French officers continued to circulate in the village, and were usually accompanied by their ardent Lebanese friends. Both the officers and their civilian friends refused to recognise me, and passed by with their noses in the air. One morning I was copying the text of an anti-British poster in the French language which had been affixed to the wall inside a café. When a French Junior Officer walked in I noticed that he

was so taken aback at my copying the poster that I immediately sensed he was responsible for putting it there. The café was a rendezvous for the pro-French zealots, which explained why the poster had not been torn down. I greeted the officer with a "Bonjour", and in answer he threw at me a booklet and said, "Voilà, mon ami ! Lisez un peu ça. C'est la réponse du général de Gaulle au discours de Churchill. Vous y verrez comment des agents britanniques ont provoqué les Syriens à prendre les armes contre nous." As the booklet was in Arabic, I accepted his gesture as a compliment. I retorted that I had already read de Gaulle's anti-British utterance in a French paper, and therefore did not require an Arabic propaganda version of it. Those were the last words I exchanged with that particular officer. Whether he was an ardent de Gaullist I did not know: if he was, then the spirit was not much in evidence. He was typical of that class of mercenary French colonial who, in the Levant, threw away French chances of retaining strong political and cultural influences. This class of Frenchman went to the Levant with one object in view: to return home rich.

The delicate situation — and that of my colleague, too — was not relieved by one or two Arab and Druze chieftains who came to us asking what Britain was going to do about the serious situation in Syria. They were sure the anti-French revolt would spread to the Lebanon, and left no doubt as to what they themselves would do. When these chieftains drove away from our billet, French agents and sympathisers reported to the Political Officer that we had given them rifles. Our callers may possibly have thought of arms, but they would have got none even had our billet been an arsenal. As it was, I had nothing more than a pistol and about thirty rounds of ammunition with which to withstand a French siege had British and French come into conflict.

A Lebanese who became a most reliable friend was in the useful position of being able to tap the telephone lines between French Garrison H.Q. at Merjayoun and the French

frontier posts. He had been able to warn me, a few days after my first arrival at Merjayoun, that the French frontier control posts had received orders by telephone to report all my movements. Why this order was given, I still do not know. Later, when the Syrian revolt broke out, I learned that I was to be kept under constant supervision and followed wherever possible, and that a constant watch was to be kept on my billet, and all my callers reported. To have been thus forewarned was helpful. I used the network of roads and tracks in the immediate vicinity to confuse the stooges, and I often used the French-controlled telephone to make false rendezvous with people. The French hide-and-seek game was not worth their candle, but I was determined, even at the cost of precious time, to make their task difficult. I had also been reliably informed that an individual whose home I was compelled to pass every time I entered and left the village, was being paid by the French to report the times of my arrivals and departures. I confused this individual by stopping my motor-cycle whenever I saw him, calling him, and asking whether he would care for a pillion ride as far as Haifa, if he would care for a swim in Lake Galilee, if he would like to see the cells of Sidon prison. He was always bewildered. I vowed that before I said good-bye to Merjayoun I would make him feel sorry for his slimy work, but unfortunately I left the village for the last time as a hospital case and was in no condition to carrying out my intention.

One French officer had the reputation of indulging in various costly and time-killing pleasures. None of these pastimes was a crime, and had nothing to do with me. I came to know about them merely because I kept my ears open. This individual was held in very poor esteem by his own Lebanese subordinates and many other francophiles, and he spread much anti-British propaganda. I doubt whether an ardent Nazi could have hated us more. Before he finally left the area his parting remarks to some Palestine Jews were: "I hate the English. They are my real enemies. They have

been the enemies of France for 200 years. . . . I am leaving the Lebanon. . . . The French are leaving. But we will come back, and come back not with a soft Mandate, but as a colonising power. We will show those bloody Arabs who are their bosses. . . . And we will give the English a lesson in colonial rule.” They are hardly words which would charm de Gaulle. There were a few French officers like this particular gentleman. By their behaviour they did incalculable harm to the French cause. There were, of course, a majority of French officers in the Levant who were staunchly co-operative and did sterling work. But a dozen good Frenchmen could not repair the damage done by a single stupid fool of the type quoted. A nation is judged by its bad characters, and not by its good ones.

A de Gaullist Frenchman with long service in the Levant remained a good friend throughout the Franco-Syrian dispute. One day he asked me to give him a pillion ride to the village of Hesbaya, situated high in the Mt. Hermon range. This French officer was a personal friend of a Druze chieftain living in this mountain village : they were old college chums. As the Druze chieftain was also a close friend of mine I had no objection to reintroducing the French officer to him. It was a slow and unpleasant journey for fifteen miles through swarms of locusts.

It was purely a social call. The French officer and the Druze chieftain, meeting again after many years, fell on each other’s neck and embraced. Each was genuinely glad to see the other. The two men spoke of past days spent together, better days than the present, and laughed and joked over college incidents they recalled. Coffee was served. Conversation became more general. We discussed the locust menace, the Druze chieftain asking me if the army could loan some flame-throwers ; we discussed the war, the Russian menace to the Middle East (to our host it was something real), and we exchanged information about the whereabouts of various mutual friends. Then the French officer began dis-

cussing local politics, the anti-French revolt in Syria, and the possibility of its reaching the Lebanon. I knew our mutual Druze friend was fanatically anti-French. He was immediately roused. Speaking fluent French, he said: "Don't you French people understand that we want you to get out of the Levant? Do we have to tell you point-blank to go? You and I are good friends in a personal sense, and I hope we remain so, but speaking as a Druze chief to you as a French representative I can only say that we want and intend to get rid of you French people. We want to be free and independent, and to achieve our aims we are ready to fight."

That was pretty clear and precise. The French officer, too surprised and confused to do more than mumble his regrets that his host should feel so sore about the matter, took his *képi* and withdrew. The Druze chieftain gave me a mischievous smile as I said *au revoir* and followed the French officer from the room. As we rode down through the beautiful valley, clothed with green vegetation and trees that were now feeding swarms of locusts, I pointed out to the French officer that his lack of tact was a chronic fault with too many of his compatriots stationed in the Levant. So many of them had the unfortunate habit of mistiming their words, of saying just the wrong thing at the wrong time. He, like many others, clever in many things, was clumsy as an ass when it came to politics. He just did not know how to see the Druze and Arab points of view, in spite of his long experience in the Levant. The periodical revolts against French administration in the Levant are sufficient testimony of the French representative's inability to present his country properly to those he administers. The French have not been kicked out of the Levant. They have thrown it away. France sent too many failures, too many second-rate men, to the Levant. Now it is too late. Even the Levantine Christians have lost faith in France.

### CHAPTER XXXI

#### A MAN OF THE LEBANON

HAPPY is he who has plenty of open-air work, and happier still if he spends all his time on a motor-cycle through a summer of unbroken sunshine. There were flies in the ointment, such as current repairs, maintenance and punctures on lonely roads. The army expects much of the untrained mechanic, who, though unable to repair a hand torch, has to keep an engine on two wheels in running order. One of the weekly maintenance tasks was "Test tappets for clearance". To this day tappets remain a mystery to me. I never discovered where they were, or what function they performed. I did not always get back home without trouble, and was constantly anxious lest the back wheel should slip away, the engine seize up or some other vital part cease functioning. Minor sabotage (which often took place at Metulla), when I left the bike unattended, and punctures added variety to road travel. Landing a puncture ten miles from a human habitation in treeless country in the midday sun sent all the swear words in about four languages rushing through the brain. Removing the rear wheel to repair a puncture is no picnic for those who are not mechanically minded. I'd sweat, curse, struggle and wriggle on the ground, smoke out all my cigarettes, only to find in the end that the heat was too strong to allow the rubber solution to stick. That meant pushing the bike for miles (or paying for a new outer tyre), and I'd acquire a violent thirst and long for the presence of another human being, if only to curse at. Sometimes, after a few hours, a lorry might come along the road, and if it were not full, the driver and I would manage to lift the bike aboard.

I preferred if possible, after a few such experiences, never to go a long distance without a pillion passenger. This unfortunate person was usually Karam Effendi, a Lebanese security official, who became the best friend I had in the Levant. It was no picnic for him to entrust life and limb to one who hated motor-cycles but who was exhilarated by speed, and often came to rest in ditches. We would roam the lonely but beautiful road up the Hasbani gorge and deserted old German road between Merjayoun and Shtaura. On these lonely roads we might spend hours before seeing a human being, and the only signs of life were often large numbers of foxes, jackals and snakes, especially at night. We would leave the roads and cut across country over tracks made of boulders and stones, the engine geared down to bottom, spluttering and crying for mercy, the tappets tapping merrily, the tyres getting cut to ribbons. In a single full week of track-bouncing the soles got ripped off two of my army boots. Karam suffered extreme inconvenience, and though frequently thrown off and bruised, he did not complain. Bees were always getting inside my loose open shirt (I wore it thus to catch the breeze and the sun) and announcing their presence with vicious stings on arm, stomach or back. Then there would be a sudden jamming of brakes, a wobble or a spill, before the bees were fished out. Then we had locusts for nearly a month, in a settling swarm that spread over hundreds of square miles. They had a nuisance value, for when you travel through them at any speed they burst on contact, leaving an unwholesome yellow stain on your clothes. They get inside your clothing, and wriggle about between shirt and skin. Near isolated villages groups of Druze and Christian Arab peasants, armed with a variety of weapons, were out on locust-destroying expeditions. Their efforts were pitifully inadequate, but the incentive to work hard was in the eating of the locusts, for, stripped of heads and wings, mashed to a pulp and eaten either raw or cooked in butter, they make a tasty meal, though I was

unwilling to risk it, since all hot-climate insects carry disease.

Karam and I lived an open-air life, wandering day long and night long, snooping here, investigating there, turning up at inconvenient moments for frontier traffickers, and holding up the rare traffic we came across. From notable, official and Bedouin alike we collected scraps and titbits of information about everything that was happening, or was likely to happen, in that mountainous frontier area. We scrounged meals where we could and took a nap or a rest by the roadside. The keen nights under the stars in the lonely Lebanese mountains take one away from the mean and sordid things of daily existence ; one feels on top of the world. With the wanton cynicism of a sadist I took my companion up and down the stony beds of wadis, over rough ploughed land, along tracks strewn with boulders, flints and rocks. He took it all in good spirit ; he was the only really keen Lebanese official I ever met. It angered me to hear the lance-corporal at the Beirut R.A.S.C. workshops criticise the condition of the motor-cycle at the monthly inspections. My colleague at Merjayoun had completely "smashed up" three bikes in about six weeks (without getting a scratch himself), so the workshops' staff had it in for all of us. I could only reply with emphasis that I was not a H.Q. dispatch-rider spending my time on the tarmacked streets of Beirut : I said that I "went places".

A surprisingly large number of peasants were abroad at night in the frontier area. They moved silently, and the soft tread of their camels is not heard until they are almost upon you. Arab and camel have no chance when a powerful motor-cycle headlight is switched on at five yards range. We always placed the bike on the stand at right angles to the road so that we could switch on the lamp and turn the handle-bars either way. At night gendarmes announced their presence to the frontier trafficker with rifle fire : we preferred a powerful light so that if it was necessary to shoot we could at least see something. Wheeled traffic at night

was so rare as to be inevitably suspect, and more often than not, when intercepted, it proved to be the property of a Lebanese Cabinet Minister. Chasing a car at night, with Karam on the pillion, was a sport which he accepted with silent reluctance, but he took it all in good part, especially when I promised to be careful on the sharp bends.

We often spent the night lying in ambush with an officer of the T.J.F.F. and a couple of platoons of his soldiers. We only went out with him when we had had word in advance that something was going to happen, and therefore had to travel to our rendezvous without lights. These nights in the mountain air took me back to north Syria, where mysterious things also went on at night, things that were entirely unsuspected by the uninitiated.

Karam was a Christian, a man of action and of very few words. He was powerfully built, tall and broad like all those frontier officials in the Levant States who spend their lives in the open air, and to whom fighting with fist and pistol is a regular routine. Any wanted character who fell into his hands quickly found that it did not pay to give evasive answers. It was an experience to watch him knock around stubborn and sulking suspects, though he would never bash them unless he was practically certain of their guilt and wanted a confession for the sake of good form. More than once I have seen him take on two at a time, insisting on my keeping out of it since it was against his principles to allow his fellow-Arabs to be struck by agents of a foreign power. Karam, more than any Arab I knew, was acutely conscious of his people's drawbacks and faults. He had spent some time in France, but because of family connections across the Atlantic his outlook was more Anglo-Saxon than French. He blamed Western influences, especially foreign military "occupation" without a state of war, for the appalling stagnation and the corruption in public affairs. The Lebanon lacked leadership, for her politicians had a tradition of toadying to their foreign friends and "advisers" instead of working for

the people's interests. The terrible impasse in which the country found itself was no credit to France or Britain. The Lebanon, apeing Western democracy without the necessary cultural foundations, was decaying fast.

He feared nobody, and possessed much moral courage. In my presence at the Government Palace at Sidon he denounced three highly important officials to a high-ranking officer. He accused them of crimes that, in most Western countries, would get them years of penal servitude. In the Levant it requires a great deal of courage for an official to carry out his duties conscientiously : it takes a maximum of courage to bring a charge against leading officials. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred bribes will buy away all your witnesses, and you are left without support to prove your case. And if you cannot prove it up to the hilt you will lose both your job and your pension. Not only that, the accused person, if important, will send his thugs to beat you up — I had already seen that done to a conscientious gendarme at Merjayoun — and will himself get you gaoled on any trumped-up charge. Karam was therefore risking a lot in making the denunciation.

When he had detailed the case against the principal official the officer turned to me and said, "Can you corroborate the evidence ? "

" Every word of it," I replied, " but army regulations do not permit me to be an official witness or put anything in writing." Verbally I could back up Karam, but that was as far as I was allowed to go. Orders were to keep out of all disputes and cases that did not directly affect the army. A few cases where army personnel had been involved in civilian disputes had resulted in army courts of enquiry and ill-feeling, and had provided a pretext for certain elements to accuse the British of interfering in the civil administration of the country. Personally, I would gladly have " run in " the official myself, since some of his actions, widely criticised in the local press, were not those expected of an ally. Further-

more, his activities were causing me some personal inconvenience, making me keen on a showdown, but since army regulations were made to be obeyed I had, reluctantly, to keep my finger out of the civilian pie. Karam was unable to prove his case without British co-operation, and he had to give up his job on the frontier. Such is the lot of conscientious men. Everyone knew he was pro-British, and our inability to prevent his downfall only made the Lebanese law-breakers (government officials all) the more contemptuous towards us.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### ZIONIST FASCISM

HERE are large numbers of oriental Jews whose home has always been amongst the Arabs. There are nearly 15,000 in Beirut, 25,000 in Aleppo, 5000 in Damascus, over 100,000 in Iraq, and many thousands more in Turkey, Iran and Egypt. Out in the broad deserts are the remnants of what is supposed to be a lost tribe of Israel, a tribe of Jewish Bedouins, said to number nearly 70,000 men, women and children, who live just like their fellow Arab Bedouins, in total illiteracy, breeding camels and goats, and wandering about the desert, sleeping under their goat-hair tents.

Arab opinion is that the oriental Jew is the only true Jew, and is the finest of them all. His Semitic blood has not been spoiled by the admixture of Hungarian, German, Austrian, French and English blood. The oriental Jew is the Jew of biblical times, differing from his Semitic Arab cousin only in religion, and practising a very similar way of life. The oriental Jew follows many Arab customs, eats Arab food, and his native tongue is the Arabic language. The Arabs have never shown any discrimination against the oriental Jew, and they have lived side by side in perfect harmony ever since they began living together. Small tradesmen and professional men, the oriental Jews form an integral and useful section of Arab life in the populous centres of the Middle East. They have assimilated Arab ways and customs in the same way as English Jews have assimilated English ways, and French Jews French ways. It can be said that the American Jew is almost a typical American, and that the English Jew is almost a typical Englishman. In the same way Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian and Egyptian Jews are almost

Arabs. Man, no matter what his race, is what his environment makes him. There is only that religious and racial difference, and even this is often not strong enough to distinguish a Jew from his fellow countrymen.

In the early and middle thirties, when Palestine came to the forefront of the news, there began a slow and steady trickle of Middle East Jews into the new Land of Israel. During the war the trickle increased until in 1944 and 1945 it became a steady stream. By the autumn of 1945 oriental Jews were entering Palestine, all of them illegally, at the rate, according to official estimates, of hundreds a week. It is now a large, controlled and well-organised movement. Already several thousands of oriental Jews have settled in Palestine. Why? Why should they want to abandon a peaceful and settled life in secure and untroubled parts of the Middle East to go to a country where terrorism reigns, where a Jew assists the Palestine police at the risk of his life, where fear of terrorist reprisals exists in every Jewish heart, where civil war can break out from one day to the next? This movement of Jews away from a settled and untroubled life of hundreds of years towards the only unsafe country in the Middle East is not logical.

By leaving their homes and travelling to Palestine by illegal means, the only means open to them, the oriental Jews run the risk of fine and imprisonment, both before they leave the Levant States and on their arrival in Palestine. This latter risk has now much diminished since the Zionist terrorists have gained the upper hand over the Palestine police and government. It is an offence for a Levantine Jew to leave his country without a passport; it is an offence to enter Palestine without a passport; it is also an offence for any Jew to be found in Syria and the Lebanon anywhere near the Palestine frontier without bona-fide reason. Are many thousands of Jews, happy and prosperous, owning their homes and businesses, having regular and ample incomes, going to sell out their houses and furniture and

shops to make a hazardous journey of hundreds of miles, hunted down all the way by police and troops, and with their wives and children suffer delays, hunger, discomfort, imprisonment and fines — are they going to do all this of their own free will ? They will enter a country unknown to them, and will live they know not where until they get there ; they will be put to manual tasks ; they will not be able to practise their life-long profession or trade ; and they will probably earn less income than before.

These people are not homeless, ill-treated, starving Jews. They have never experienced anti-Semitism (how could they if they live amongst Semites ?), they have never seen a pogrom, they have never had to wear in their lapels a yellow Star of David. They have no grounds for selling out and leaving their homes. Why, then, do they leave home and make their hazardous way to Palestine ? The answer is simple. Because the Zionists want them in Palestine. Oriental Jews are not politically minded : they have never heard of Zionism ; the European Jew — the Zionist — is as much a stranger to them as to the Arabs. The Zionists need Jews and still more Jews inside Palestine, they want to build up the population to exceed the non-Jewish population, they want to fill Palestine with Jews for purely political reasons. That a Jew is homeless or not homeless seems to be a matter of less urgency than filling up Palestine, even with Jews taken from secure homes. A Central American country offered in 1946 to give immediate homes and shelter to thousands of Jewish D.P.s in Europe, but the offer was turned down. Naturally, since every Jew who settles in Central America is a Jew lost to Palestine. The Zionists play up the sufferings of the homeless European Jew merely to arouse sympathy and further their political cause. Homeless Jews must go on suffering rather than settle in Central America.

In the prisons of Merjayoun and of other places there often lodged many Jews and Jewesses who had been arrested

when attempting to gain illegal entry into Palestine. They were all oriental Jews from Baghdad, Iran, Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut, who had sold out their homes and businesses. They gave a lot of information to the Lebanese authorities. Here are some of their opinions.

(1) Zionist agents were hard at work in the Jewish communities in the Middle East. These agents were warning the Jews that the Arabs were about to start a pogrom against them, and such isolated communities as those in Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, etc. would be wiped out in no time. It behoved every Jewish family to sell out and make its way to Palestine quickly, before the pogrom started. In Palestine there was a large Jewish population, sufficiently well armed to defend itself, and furthermore it had the protection of the British army and the Palestine police. Palestine was a much safer country than Syria, Iraq or Iran. Those who decided to sell out and migrate were put in touch with the underground smuggling organisation, which undertook their illegal transport to the Land of Israel.

(2) The Zionist agents were promising profitable work to the poorer Jewish families, and sending them to Beirut where they would earn good money. Once in Beirut these poor Jews were being unwittingly organised into parties for transport to Palestine.

(3) Sick Jews were being told by the Zionist agents that they must go to Beirut to get free medical treatment from Jewish specialists. Once in Beirut they too were in the trap, and were being dispatched to Palestine.

(4) Religious and orthodox Jews were being told by the Zionist agents that they must make a pilgrimage, free of charge, to the ancient Jewish shrine of Soujut, near Merjayoun, in south Lebanon. These, too, found themselves being secretly transported to Palestine.

All these people, when they reached Beirut, were housed in Arab and Jewish hotels and boarding-houses, many of them in the notorious Jewish quarter, Wadi Abou Jamil.

There they waited perhaps a day, perhaps a week, seriously expecting a call to go to their new job, the Jewish physicians or the shrine at Soujut. One evening at dusk a number of them would be told to be ready, and an Arab would come and take them to a waiting motor-coach, taxis or cars. The vehicle, loaded to capacity, would move off into the night. Next stop Palestine.

All this seems too easy and naïve. Why should unwilling Jews allow themselves to be so duped into being lured to Palestine? There is no doubt that many of them have not the vaguest idea they are going to Palestine. To appreciate fully the ease with which these Jews were being deceived one must be able to understand a little of oriental mentality. The oriental mind is attuned to the idea of feudalism, which means that the non-feudal classes, whether Jews or Arabs, live their lives doing what they are told to do. Further, the oriental, whether Jew or Arab, does not possess an agile, thinking mind; his brain is not exercised to reason things out, to be independent, to question the motives of others. You can tell any half-educated oriental to do the stupidest things, and he will obediently do them without question. I have seen it happen time and time again. The oriental mind exists in a tradition of resignation. Most of the Jews who were being duped into going to Palestine were really being duped. They did not know any better. Many of the Jews held in the Lebanese prisons were utterly bewildered by the succession of events which had landed them there. They just could not work things out. Some of them went so far as to declare that it was Allah's wish they were there. . . . Arab resignation!

The oriental Jews who are being smuggled to Palestine come up against their first and only obstacles when approaching the end of their journey. The obstacles can be overcome only with bribes. An Arab guide, well supplied with bribe money, travels in the vehicle with the illegal immigrants, and it is he who does all the talking when a customs or

gendarmerie patrol intercepts the party near the frontier. The vehicle pulls up in the dead of night in hilly or mountainous country, possibly somewhere in the Merjayoun district. Another Arab guide is there waiting. His only words to the Jewish immigrants are: "Follow me". He guides them over the rough tracks into the Promised Land. Their arrival is expected, and they are met by Jews from one of the colonies that are very conveniently situated just inside the frontier. The immigrants are taken into the colony, given a hot meal, perhaps a bath, medical attention if it is required, clean clothing, a Palestine identity card with their photograph already on it, and as quickly as possible they are put into a Jewish bus and whisked away into the interior.

What happens to these Jews once they reach their destination? They are now Palestine subjects, in possession of false but none the less legally recognised Palestine identity cards, and come under British government. At once they find that the milk and honey of the new Land of Israel are not for them, but for the European Jews. They are no longer free men and women. The Zionists regiment and discipline them, and detail them for work which may be distasteful. The Zionists regard the oriental Jew as an inferior, much as they regard the Arabs, and give him the menial and manual jobs in building and agriculture. Palestine is already too full of professors, lawyers, doctors, bankers, tradespeople and school-teachers from Europe, and the oriental professional man and tradesman find that all the best jobs have been taken by Europeans. So he has to put his hand to the spade and the steering wheel. But before the oriental Jews are put to work they are pulled into military and ideological shape by the Zionists. Every fit male and female immigrant must become proficient in the use of small arms, such as the rifle, tommy-gun, pistol and hand grenade. The training takes place at secret drill-grounds inside many Jewish colonies. Directed to a job and a home, the immigrant must adapt himself to community discipline. It was

not possible for me to be present to see how these orientals adapted themselves to the unaccustomed regimentation, but I have seen Jewish boys and girls of no more than 14 and 15 years of age being put through their paces with rifles and tommy-guns. The outward aspect of a Jewish settlement is one of co-operative, socialistic construction, but the reality is a negation of socialistic principles. Racial ideology, biased teaching and military training prefix the word socialist with the word national. The children of the illegal immigrants, if under the age of 15, are often separated from their parents and come under the care of appropriately trained teachers, who see that they learn just what the Zionists want them to learn. All these Middle East Jews, cajoled, coaxed and coerced away from a settled life thus find themselves completely duped, swept into the maelstrom of a highly organised community whose immediate aim is to usurp from another people the land which has given them shelter from Hitler. It should not be forgotten that the oriental Jew is a little surprised to find what goes on in a country under British Mandate and protection.

The majority of oriental Jews who were being intercepted when attempting to enter Palestine said they had no real desire to go there, but having sold their homes and lost their old jobs they were willing to make a fresh start in Palestine. Having got so far and having burned their boats there was little object in returning to their old homes. However, amongst the many intercepted immigrants there were a few who were eager to get to their "own" country and start a new life.

One day at Merjayoun, when asking about food supplies for a batch of oriental Jews, I was informed that someone wanted to see me. I found him in the *gendarmerie* office. When I asked him his business he said he was a Jew from Aleppo, and had come to Merjayoun to find his son who had been kidnapped.

"What makes you think you will find him here?" I asked him.

"I'd heard in Aleppo that kidnapped Jewish children are taken to Beirut, whence they are smuggled to Palestine. The police in Beirut told me eighty Jews were in the prison here at Merjayoun, and suggested I might find my son amongst them."

I asked him the name and age of his son, but did not find him on the list of the arrested Jews. The man doubted me, so I asked a gendarme to take him to see the prisoners. The man came back to me in an excited state. He begged me to do something to help him trace his son. I suggested to him that he knew that Jewish children were being kidnapped from Aleppo and smuggled to Palestine. He admitted that he had heard about children disappearing, but had done nothing about it and had not reported the matter to the Aleppo police. I reassured the man that his sixteen-year-old son was probably safe in Palestine, already being taught to throw hand grenades. I told him to contact a certain Jew in Beirut, a member of the Jewish Agency, who would most likely be able to tell him what exactly had happened to his son. The man looked at me incredulously, unwilling to believe that members of the Jewish Agency could be occupied in smuggling Jews to Palestine.

One large party of Jews trekking to Palestine were brought to Merjayoun prison in a bad state of health. They were nearly all poor people from the slums of Aleppo and Baghdad, and they included a large, ragged, barefooted family, utterly penniless, who had come 800 miles to spend their summer holidays in the Lebanon. They expected one to believe this tale. This family was very keen to get to Palestine, where they would certainly be better off than in Baghdad. Most of the party were dressed in their own Arab clothes, and were, in fact, Arabs in everything but their religion. They were hungry and thirsty, their clothes torn and dirty, their feet cut and bleeding, their bodies stinking with sweat and dirt. They had spent three days and two nights lost in the wild Lebanese mountains, abandoned by their Arab guides, and

were caught when on a hill looking down into the Promised Land, within a mile of their goal. I felt sorry for them. Though they were the victims of Zionist propaganda, and had been told wondrous tales of a new Land of Israel with a golden future, they could hardly be materially worse off there than they had been before. They were largely illiterate, utterly penniless and were ideal recruits to fill the roles for which the Zionists wanted them. They were the type of people who could be easily whipped into the shape desired.

### *CHAPTER XXXIII*

## ARAB TREACHERY

THE influx of Jews by land into Palestine would not be possible without active and elaborate Arab co-operation. All the transport used belongs to Arabs. The brains behind the smuggling organisation is the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, which acts through an underground organisation of Jewish agents in the Levant states. This organisation gets the Jews out of their homes and converges them on Beirut, which is the jumping-off place for Palestine. Here an Arab organisation takes over, and transports and guides the immigrants to Palestine. The Arabs take over the moment the Jews are warned to be ready to move off. I need not go into the details of this Arab organisation, but I merely point out that the Zionists cannot do without it. But when it is realised how slowly information travels in the Arab countryside, when it is realised that Arabs, furnished with ample funds, are waiting at a certain point in the mountains, at a precise hour on precise nights, and that they have no telephonic communication with Beirut, eighty miles away, it is obvious that a very well-organised and detailed system exists. I had a telephone and an army radio network at my disposal, but these Arab guides, who were villagers living near the frontier, had no such facilities, yet they knew when and how many Jews were coming from Beirut to be guided by them over the frontier. The only people in these frontier villages who had the use of the telephone were the customs and *gendarmerie* posts.

Nearly all the Arab guides were known not only to the Lebanese authorities, but to me as well. I have been to their houses at midnight, at two or three o'clock in the morning,

and found them out. Where were they ? I would go back there next day, accompanied by gendarmes and Lebanese security inspectors to ask them where they had been the night before, when, according to information supplied to me, a party of Jews had been smuggled over the border. Their fellow villagers protected these smugglers of Jews. An alibi was always available. Witnesses would come forward and make a statement that So-and-so, a well-known Jew trafficker, had spent the whole night at their house. Not an hour or two, nor the evening, but all night. And it would just happen to be the night when Jewish immigrants, a mile or two away, were finding their way in the dark, in country new to them, picking out the unmapped stony tracks that led to the frontier. When challenged in a hostile and forceful manner these Moslem Arabs were always very hurt. " Me ? An Arab ? Smuggle dirty yehoudis to Filistin ? Why, I'd kill every one of them I saw around here." They would swear most solemnly on the Koran, on the heads of their parents, children, cousins and on the head of Allah Himself that they had never guided a Jew anywhere. This would be followed by a generous offer to keep a watch for Jews and intercept them when attempting to reach Palestine. Smugglers were rarely caught. The gendarmes would not touch them unless they were caught in the act, and since the act always took place in the dead and dark of the mountain night, the catching of them was impossible. The night swallowed them up too quickly.

The rare smugglers and guides who were caught were soon back in the game when they had completed their six months in prison. They earned handsome profits, finding it paid to risk six months' gaol. Customs and gendarme officials were also in the game, earning ample bribes to let both Jews and guides " escape ".

The practice of bribery in the Orient is so widespread and so well established that it is regarded as an honourable and approved way of supplementing one's income. The

risk of being found out is great, but supposing you are found out? Nothing happens. The gendarme takes bribes, but so does his sergeant, and above the sergeant the adjutant is up to his neck in corruption, and the officer will not take action against his senior N.C.O. because he himself has several jobs on his conscience; should anyone go to the district officer and report the officer of the *gendarmerie* for corruption, the former thinks twice about it, because his bank balance is also rising out of all proportion to his salary. And so it goes on, right up to the top, and each rank maintains a discreet silence, because if he runs in the rank below him for corruption he himself will get exposed. The door to Palestine was thus wide open to Jewish immigrants.

In the immigration traffic I had no sentiments. Personally it mattered little whether there were two thousand or two million Jews inside Palestine. I was merely a minor tool of the army and the Colonial Office, which were jointly trying, but failing, to carry out the conflicting terms of Mandates, White Papers and various promises. The help given to Zionism by Arabs in the immigration racket was nothing compared with the land sales, made at inflated prices and in defiance of the law, by Arabs to Jews. Higher Arab policy aims at keeping down the number of Jews and preventing the Jewish community from obtaining more land. But thanks to Arab collaborationists — or traitors, as many Moslems described them to me — the policy failed. The Jews were achieving both their aims. Whilst Arab politicians are proclaiming their high ideals and threatening a holy war against Zionism, many an Arab who gets the chance and is paid for it will do anything to aid the Zionists. The latter are building up a Jewish State, very largely with gifts of capital from America, much of which finds its way into Arab hands. Palestine will be totally lost to the Arabs if the individual Arab does not cease helping the Zionists.

The Jews are not slow to keep the goodwill of the individual Arab. In the daily life in the countryside there is no

discord between Arab and Jew, and there is even evidence of a great deal of friendly neighbourliness. The cordiality was not limited to courtesy visits. Ideas were exchanged on all matters of common interest. I have seen Arabs teaching Arabic to Jewish children, and I have known cases where Jewish doctors have gone out to Arab villages to do voluntary health work amongst the peasants. Individual Jews and Arabs have a deep understanding of the other, and are able to live peacefully side by side. Jewish policy is necessarily one of friendliness towards the Arabs. The friendly policy, backed up with ample baksheesh, picks up all the weak individual Arabs to whom money is the first consideration in life. This Jewish policy of open practical friendliness is helping to undermine the long-term policy of Arab statesmen. Arab weakness and treachery have become a strong Fifth Column.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### SEMITIC CONTRASTS

BRITISH military and police are forbidden to spend the night in the Huleh Valley. The reason for the order is that it is one of the world's most highly malarious areas. It is in northern Palestine; it is five miles wide and twenty-three long and it is surrounded entirely by mountains. It is a freak of nature, and is only seven feet above sea-level. The Huleh Valley marks the beginning of the great rift that goes down the Jordan Valley through Lake Galilee and the Dead Sea, and continues beyond to the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea. The head waters of the Jordan are at the north-eastern corner of the valley, and the river meanders through it, into Lake Huleh, and on and down to Lake Galilee. Large tracts of the Huleh depression are still humid, steamy, malarious and impenetrable swamp.

It is here, in this remarkable place, that the observer can most easily see the progress of the Jewish battle for Palestine. If honest endeavour, sweat, toil and struggle against adverse elements deserve their reward, then the Jews are entitled to take their due. On purely moral and political grounds the Jewish claim to Palestine is very questionable, but on economic grounds the results achieved stake a powerful claim to at least a large part of the country. And here in the Huleh, more than anywhere else, except perhaps in the Plain of Esdraelon, the evidence is convincing. Several Jewish settlements are busy reclaiming the swamps, bringing the land under cultivation and using the Jordan (for the first time in its timeless history) for irrigation purposes. Slowly but unremittingly the Jews, working under conditions of great difficulty and in a summer heat that is almost unbearable,

are attacking both the swamps and the scourge of malaria. During the last fifteen years they have brought large areas under the plough. They also operate fish farms, and fishery and agricultural research stations. Amongst the better known colonies are the Ussishkin settlements, Dan, Dafna, Kafr Giladi, Manara (nearly all of them active reception stations for illegal immigrants) and Manahayim. Dan, of course, is famous, though the present settlement was inaugurated only in 1939. Life in these settlements, as far as the individual is concerned, is unadulterated communism, complete with typical communistic discipline. As communities, as tools of political Zionism, as breeding grounds of racial ideology, they are far removed from the principles of communism. Individual life is hard, there is no cash reward for toil and sweat, yet the people are happy, and happy in a way that we have long since forgotten. Any Jew who does not submit to the discipline, who is not prepared to pull his weight and do his share, is expelled. The settlement committee plans the programme of construction tasks to be carried out, and there is no relaxation until the job is finished. A far-reaching aim of the settlers is to make their land an economic proposition, and, in many cases, to repay its cost to the Jewish National Fund. The job is long and hard, for land in Palestine costs a lot of American money, and the Arabs do not sell it cheap. When a large slice of Huleh land reaches forty times the value it had fifteen years ago a Christian Arab of Merjayoun, well known to me, will sell it to the Jews. They will pay his price. The male adults of the settlements, by their free contribution of labour and toil, acquire a share in the settlement property. Essential needs, such as bungalow accommodation, furniture, clothing, food, medical attention and recreational facilities are provided free of charge. Meals are taken in the communal refectory, whilst there are comfortable lounges, libraries and many amenities for cultural activity, such as evening classes, debates and lectures. Children are separated from their parents, who have to work,

and come under the permanent supervision of specially trained teachers. Parents and children meet once a week. There is virtually no private home life.

There is an extraordinary entrain, a buoyancy, a zest for life and an air of self-confidence about these settlements. They are almost entirely self-supporting, they are equipped with electric light, a workshop and all kinds of modern appliances. They send away the surplus of wheat, fish, fruit, vegetables, eggs and milk to the Jewish co-operative societies in the towns. Tractors and other agricultural machinery, plus Jewish brains and industry, enable a single Jewish settlement to produce as much as half a dozen Arab villages, each of them at least as large as the settlement.

Perhaps no further than two miles from a Jewish settlement you may walk into an Arab village. It is like stepping a thousand years back into history. You see no more healthy young people in shorts and open shirt, no more cleanliness, no more spick-and-span neatness ; instead, you are looking at dilapidated shacks, women in filthy long blue garments and with dirty matted hair, bearded men squatting in the shade, men and women struggling on the earth with wooden ploughs drawn by animals, grubby barefooted urchins with matter oozing from eye sores ; men, women and children alike with haggard drawn faces caused by recurrent malarial fever. Here one is received with just as much cordiality as at a Jewish settlement, and the Arab meekly apologises for the modesty of his home and food, of the inadequacy of his hospitality. Two miles away there is electric light, whilst here is a smoky paraffin lamp ; instead of a clean and business-like communal kitchen, there is a dirty woman squatting on her haunches on the dry earth pumping a deficient primus stove ; in place of a hygienic lavatory there is a stench coming from a round hole in the ground ; and where the Jews have wire-gauzed windows the Arabs have myriads of flies and mosquitoes. The contrast is absolutely staggering. It is also terribly eloquent. The impression

you are almost bound to get is : " As far as Palestine goes, the Arabs are finished ".

It is said that we still live in a world where the law of the jungle prevails. This law no longer prevails in a community where social security is the vogue, but it does prevail between nations, races and religions. The law of the jungle ensures the survival of the fittest. By virtue of asserting their brains, their wealth, their organising ability, their knowledge and their incomparable skill, the Jews are taking over Palestine from the Arabs. The process continues apace, the Jews are determined and organised, the Arabs merely bewildered by the transformation : it is the law of the jungle, and the Jew is the lion. Arab dominance, Arab independence and Arab sovereignty in Palestine are things of the past, unless . . . Unless the inevitable Holy Crusade against Zionism can save them. Protected by the British Mandate and backed up with American capital the Jews are taking the chance offered them. The National Home was given them, but it is now a thing of the past. The Jews took it in their stride and now demand something larger. You cannot call a voluntary halt to national vitality, national expansion, to ambitions only half achieved. You cannot expect the Jews at this stage to limit their numbers in Palestine with the eventual and almost certain risk of being one day attacked by Islam in far greater numbers. The expansion must go on, fast and remorseless ; the momentum cannot be slowed down.

We English, we Europeans who talk of the Arab-Jewish question without understanding the Arabs, make a wrong approach to it. We like to tell the Arabs of Palestine that since the Jews have been there in large numbers their health is improving, their birth-rate is rising and their economic wealth is increasing. We like to tell them they are better off than they ever were before, that they are better off than the Arabs of other states. We overlook the oriental viewpoint. We overlook the fact that the brown desert is the natural element of the Arab, that he is a man of the desert.

To the Zionist and the European argument the Arab replies : “ But I don’t want to plough my land with machines ; I don’t believe in doctors ; I don’t want to be educated ; I would rather use a donkey or a camel than motor-cars and lorries. I am happy as I am, and I shall be unhappy with all these new contrivances, these Western ideas. If you believe in democracy, then you will let live ; you will let live the Arab in Palestine as he has lived there for 1300 years ; respect my simple wishes and desires, dirty and ignorant though I am. I do you no harm, I do the Jew no harm, and I don’t infringe on your rights and freedom. There is plenty of room in the world for the Jews. By sending the European Jews to Palestine you are bringing trouble on yourselves, for you are arousing the whole of Islam.”

The south of England, from Devonshire to Kent and from Wiltshire to the Isle of Wight, is about the same size as Palestine. How would the English inhabitants of this corner of England feel if a very powerful foreign government decided to settle one Italian for every two Englishmen in this area, encouraging them to make it their national home ? The Italians, having acquired their national home, form large terrorist movements which use force to usurp southern England from its long-settled inhabitants, whilst the leaders of the Italian community demand the setting-up of an Italian State. The Italians bring a new way of life and new methods of agriculture with them ; they introduce the camel and the donkey, putting the railways and motor roads out of use. At the same time they assure the natives that they will be better off because there will be no more road accidents, no more train disasters, and no more cancer and heart disease due to the stress of modern life. How would we feel about such an invasion ? We would feel precisely how the Arabs of Palestine now feel. It may be argued that such a position would be no comparison to the Palestine case, since the Jews have introduced modern and not ancient methods into Palestine. Of course, that is how we and the Jews see it. But the Arabs see it differently.

The Arab prefers to remain a slow-moving creature; European methods of progress and modernisation make no appeal to him. Furthermore, the astute Westernised Arab is fully aware of all the evils of modern industrial civilisation, and feels certain that his is something infinitely preferable.

The inhabitants of southern England, having been obliged to accept the settlement amongst them of a vast community from another country, see themselves obliged to change their ways of life, much against their will. They appeal to the rest of England, they call on the moral and material support of the whole British Empire and the whole Protestant world to resist the usurping of their part of England by foreigners. The foreign power which encourages the settlement of the Italians in southern England tries to convince the native inhabitants that their territory is a historical home of the Romans, that they should be reasonable and tolerant and do their best to live peacefully side by side with the new arrivals, who are people of a different religion and a different way of life.

If we English could see the Arab point of view we would find an obvious solution to the Palestine problem. But fortunately for the English, though unfortunately for the Arabs of Palestine, we have never been in a position to say: "Leave us alone in our country. We are happy as we are, we prefer to suffer from cancer, tuberculosis and heart disease, we prefer the stress and worries of modern life, we prefer to be killed and maimed in road accidents, we prefer to die in voluntary hospitals; we prefer to pay heavy taxes for our wars, for our social insurance, for our unemployment; we prefer all these evils to a new and healthier way of life. If you are really democratic you will leave us alone to live in our way, to make our own way of life as we have done in southern England for hundreds of years."

CHAPTER XXXV

MERJAYOUN MAÑANA

MERJAYOUN village, to which I returned three or four nights a week to sleep, and where I occasionally spent a few daylight hours, was a happy place. Its inhabitants lived in a comfortable dream-world, closing their eyes to all their current problems and abandoning themselves to pleasant and fanciful imaginings of the Merjayoun they would like to see. Many regarded their status as Lebanese citizens as a purely technical and temporary condition, pending a change for the better, about which they were willing to do nothing. Throughout the Levant one meets Syrians and Lebanese, especially amongst the Christians, who either are not nation-conscious or who are ashamed of their Syrian or Lebanese nationality. Usually their attachment to their religion is much stronger than their attachment to their country. "I am a Syrian Protestant", "I am Armenian Catholic", "I am Greek Orthodox" were the kind of answers I used to get when enquiring about the nationality of people. At Merjayoun, if mere wishing could change nationality, there were already a few Americans and Palestinians. 17,000 inhabitants of Merjayoun have emigrated across the Atlantic during the past thirty years, and every family in the village has connections of a close relationship in Canada, U.S.A. or Brazil. Their relatives across the water have in many cases opted for American or Canadian citizenship, and, by a peculiar Merjayoun process of reasoning, many of those who are left behind are, by relationship, not far from being Americans as well. The "Palestinians" are some of those villagers who owned, or still own, land in the Huleh Valley which is now in Palestine but which, some

twenty years ago, was still a part of the Merjayoun administrative district. Neither Moslem nor Christian Arabs regard geographical areas in terms of maps ; many of them do not know what maps are. An imaginary line drawn on a piece of paper by European powers in order to create an artificial state out of southern Syria cannot change the ways of thought of the peasants. They just carry on as before, as though no frontier line existed. Europeans in conversation tell you they "looked across the frontier" ; but the Arabs never see a map and therefore cannot "look across" an imaginary line which for them does not exist. Some of the peasants are given a little card (which they probably cannot read) declaring they are Palestinian subjects, whilst other peasants get a card which states they are Lebanese subjects. Neither maps nor identity cards can change the traditional customs, the centuries-old comings and goings of the peasants. No matter whether they are technically Lebanese or Palestinian, they still regard themselves as Arabs if they are Moslems ; and as Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox or Maronite if they are Christians. Some villagers of Merjayoun who have, or have had, land in the Huleh Valley, who still have family connections there, or whose spiritual and historical home was there, would, given a free choice, prefer to regard themselves as Palestinians, though they held Lebanese identity cards.

The self-deception about their nationality led them along another easy path of thought and fancy : they wanted to see Merjayoun annexed to Palestine. I have met Christian Arabs who shared the Moslems' anti-Zionist sentiments, and I have met many who were still sitting on the fence, having failed to make up their minds about Zionism. At Merjayoun, however, the Christian Arab sentiment seemed to be pro-Zionist, especially amongst the landowning class and the tradespeople. The sentiment expressed itself in an open desire to be annexed to Palestine and so come under British administration. When I questioned them further on their

pro-Zionist sentiments they had their answers ready. Sometimes these answers were quite reasonable and sensible. "The Christians of the Levant," I was told, "are in a similar position to the Jews. They are a religious minority in a potentially hostile Moslem world. Their culture is very similar to the Jewish and, like the Jews, the Christians are all literate. The Christians practice the same trades and professions as the Jews. Furthermore, the Levantine Christians are not really Arabs. They are the descendants of the Crusaders, and therefore have a European origin. . . . And then, look at Palestine. The Jews and British together have made it the finest country in the Middle East, but in the Lebanon we stagnate as we did under the Turks. You can do business in Palestine. You can't do any here in the Lebanon."

But the Arab Christians of Merjayoun do nothing to further their interests, to achieve their ambitions. They ask for Palestinian nationality, they talk of action and progress, but they still live as did their lazy forefathers. They clamour for electric light and irrigation, but let the melted snows of the Litani River rush in full flood, untapped and untouched, into the Mediterranean. Merjayoun could be one of the finest tourist centres in the whole Middle East, but not a Christian Arab penny is spent on hotels or amenities to attract visitors. Two enormous Crusader Castles, two sources of the Jordan and a rich heritage of biblical and historical ruins all lay within a few miles of Merjayoun, but no effort is expended to develop the area. "Have you seen our Crusader Castles?" I was often asked. "They are worth a visit."

"Have you seen them?" I would ask in reply, knowing well they had not.

"Well, no. They are not easily accessible."

"I have visited them," I would tell them, "and I took the trouble to climb up the mountain-sides to reach them." A thing they would never dream of doing. Anything that

requires an effort, mental or physical, is shunned. A few miles from Merjayoun is the village of Banias, the Cæsarea Philippi of the Bible, now a decayed and neglected spot. At Banias you can still see the great caverns used by Herod Agrippa as his armoury. In later centuries the Crusaders made the site a place of worship, and Greek inscriptions in the rock, carved by the Crusaders, are still decipherable. In any European country Banias would rank as a foremost national treasure; where it is, it is of no interest or consequence to any Arab, Christian or Moslem. Just in front of Herod Agrippa's caverns one of the two main sources of the Jordan bursts up from underground over a breadth of about seventy yards. The spring is an impressive sight. Instead of rushing away in foaming torrents the melted snows of Hermon seep down through the heart of the mountain and form a great underground lake. The water forces its way up to daylight in the two great springs at Banias and at Dan. For centuries the Christians of Merjayoun have allowed the near-by spring waters of the Jordan to run away to their useless Dead Sea end. To-day the air at the Banias Jordan source is polluted by the rotting carcasses of dead dogs, donkeys and mules, which seem to be taken there when injured or dying. The lifeless villagers of Banias use the Jordan waters for all purposes except irrigation; they render them unfit for human consumption.

The Jordan spring adjoining the near-by Jewish settlement at Dan is likewise used by Arab peasants as wash-tub and lavatory, though for nothing more useful. The excrement and filth they leave behind does not deter young Jews and Jewesses from swimming in the deeper parts of the spring water. Here, at Tell el Cadi, next to Dan, two million tons of water a day, all the year round, surge to life in a cool verdant glade, thick with the undergrowth of vegetation. Within a few yards of the source the waters of the spring are harnessed to irrigate Jewish settlements in the area. Such an idea had never occurred to the Arabs during 1300

years, or, if the idea had occurred to them, no spark of energy was there to put the idea to practical use.

Throughout the centuries of Saracen and Arab occupation the Jordan had rendered no services to mankind, except perhaps to provide bottles of Holy Jordan water (God forbid !) to eccentric Christian spinsters and other religious cranks in Europe and America. Until the Jews came, the world's most famous and most abnormal river was never used for breeding fish, irrigating land, nor did it have a village or a town on its banks. The Jews have not stopped at fish breeding and irrigation : they are extracting the chemicals deposited by the Jordan in the Dead Sea. The arrival of the Jews has given a new life to the Jordan.

NOTE.—Any pro-Zionist sentiments, and any desire to see Lebanese territory transferred to Palestine, expressed during the war by Christian Arabs, were prompted by their admiration for the efficient British administration of the Holy Land. It never occurred to them that Britain would one day give up the Mandate. No Christian Arab would want to see any Lebanese territory transferred to Palestine now that the British have gone. They prefer even inefficient Arab rule to Israeli rule.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE METWALIS

ALMOST all of the south of the Lebanon from the coast inland to the Palestine frontier overlooking the Huleh Valley is Shia or Metwali Moslem territory. The Metwalis are the most backward of Moslems, and are of the same sect as the Moslems of Persia and Azerbaijan. They acknowledge as the Prophet not Mahomet, but his son-in-law Ali. The wild mountain territory of south Lebanon is well populated with Metwalis living in several hundred villages in an area some forty miles by thirty. These Moslems, according to their highly educated chieftains, got very angry over the Azerbaijan affair in the autumn of 1945, declaring it to be the first aggression against Moslem territory by any country since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Compared with the rest of the Lebanon, the Metwali country is incredibly backward. The largest agglomerations are Bint Jbail and the little town of Nabatiya, west of Merjayoun. Every year at Nabatiya a "blood-letting" ceremony by religious fanatics takes place. Scores of men, working themselves into a trance of religious fervour, run, dance and jump in frenzied movement, slashing themselves with knives. As the English press would say, the streets run with blood. Well, blood does run fairly freely and some drops do stain the ground. Occasionally one of the fanatics dies from loss of blood, whereupon he is canonised as a Moslem saint.

Outside the feudal landowning class, illiteracy amongst the Metwalis is complete. A group of illiterate Metwalis, by some peculiar process, were members of the Lebanese communist party, and made a fortune in 1944 and 1945 by

smuggling Jews to Palestine. I had occasion to visit a few of these proletarian opportunists in prison, but somehow they managed to reside there only a short while.

The big Metwali chieftains are family rivals of many generations. They are all immensely rich families, and own large numbers of villages and enormous tracts of land ; they are showmen and opportunists, always at loggerheads with one another, but in one thing they are all the same — their thousands of fanatical followers and tribesmen are loyal to them unto death. The ignorant peasants worship their feudal chiefs as the Nazis worshipped Hitler ; they are stubborn, fanatical and obedient. At their chieftains' word every Metwali in the Lebanon would charge across the frontier into Palestine, brandishing knives and rifles, and getting mown down by Zionist tommy-guns. Not that the chieftains would give such a crazy order, but if it came, the peasants would obey. One day the order will be given for the peasants to sneak into Palestine to start a holy Islamic war against Zionism, but that is another matter.

One Metwali chieftain had the reputation of being a big hashish smuggler and land dealer with the Jews of Palestine. A very high provincial officer asked for my co-operation in catching him red-handed, for there was plenty of evidence to confirm his suspicions. But Metwali chieftains are not fools ; they are astute men, shrewd and of keen intellect ; none would be so foolish as to allow himself to be caught. Why should he, when he can call upon any of his subordinates to do his smuggling for him ? Hashish smugglers were often intercepted by local gendarmes, but when enquiries showed that the hashish was being smuggled for the benefit of a Metwali chieftain the *gendarmerie* let the matter drop. One conscientious gendarme, who pursued his enquiries too far, for his trouble got beaten up by thugs sent by the chieftain.

As one acquires more and more experience of the Middle East, one encounters more and more varied aspects of what is generally termed " the Orient ". There are dozens of

Orients, each different from the other. The Metwali country was an Orient totally different from any I had yet encountered. It was an area ruled by powerful rivals whom the government of the Lebanon dared not touch. The big Metwali chieftains discourage any attempts by the government to introduce education. In fact, no government interference of any kind is tolerated, so that the Metwali peasants still live in the most primitive and dirty conditions. The peasants do not question the actions and motives of their chiefs. In September 1945 a Beirut Christian newspaper created a sensation by publishing a facsimile of a deed of sale of some Huleh land by a Metwali chieftain to a Jewish syndicate in Palestine. The chieftain could not deny the fact of the sale, and there was much expression of disgust in many Arab countries at this act of so-called treachery. But the chieftain faced the storm of indignation by asserting that the sale had been made by a member of his family without his knowledge. In the Lebanon you can put that tale over on the Metwali community, but the more enlightened public of Beirut is not so easily misled. In the end the storm died down and nothing further happened. You can be a traitor to what thinking Moslems consider to be a noble cause, but when you are a powerful chieftain with uncountable wealth you are a law unto yourself and you can do what you like.

I asked some of the chieftain's followers what they thought about his sale of land to the hated Zionists. The answer was one I did not expect, and it throws some light on the fanatical Metwali mentality. "Our great chief may have sold some land to the dirty yehoudis, and it may seem a wrongful act; but he is a wise and knowing man, and knows best what he should do. Time will prove that he has done the best thing. We do not admit that he has done anything wrong."

The blind faith of these peasants in anything they are told to believe was well illustrated in the village of Jouaiyé as recently as 1945. This village is only a few miles from Tyre and from the main coastal road that connects Haifa

with Beirut. It is a village that is by no means remotely secluded from the outside world. In 1945 the peasants of Jouaiyé still believed that Hitler's mother was born there. They not only believed it : in their minds it was a definite, indisputable fact that Abu Ali (everywhere Hitler is Abu Ali) was born of a woman from their village. It was a waste of time to argue with the peasants about it. The same peasants were fanatical followers of the chieftain who sold his land to the Jews.



## Part Six



### *CHAPTER XXXVII*

#### MAID OF THE MOUNTAINS

ONE day during a period of drinking with one of my Palestine police friends, he said, "You want to take it easy. You might get unpopular with certain people around here." I had to confess to appearing to be always very busy, but in reality I was meeting with so much frustration in my work that I was already in the same frame of mind about frontier security as the police. I was not over-zealous, and did not go beyond my strict duties. My daily incursions into Palestine were often pleasure or social trips. It is not always right to assume that a busy man is an over-zealous one. I was, in English parlance, burning the candle at both ends, sleeping only three or four nights a week. But there was no restriction on enjoying the sparkling mountain air at night, or on talking until the dawn with one's friends. The urge to explore the historical countryside was irresistible, and none was there to hinder my wanderings to Kuneitra, Tiberias, Safad, Haifa, Sidon, Banias, Hasbaya, and near-by biblical places. All this took time out of the twenty-four hours. When you feel you are really living, what matters the lack of sleep or any other inconvenience?

I was one of those foolish motor-cyclists who think : "It can't happen to me." Camels, mules, cattle, dogs and people had shot across my path and caused me to have minor spills ; I had had stones hurled at me when travelling at fair speeds ; I had been forced into ditches by careless Jewish and Arab lorry drivers. The charmed existence only encouraged the foolish belief that I was immune from serious mishap. Afterwards, when it was too late, I buried this idea. I was

glad to get the rest I had been neglecting, and to find myself once again, after about four years, in the daily company of British soldiers. It felt like being back in the army again.

When I came out of hospital it was decided that I should collect my kit from Merjayoun and transfer my residence to Bint Jbail. My successor at Merjayoun, George W——, who had had the misfortune to endure the French Colonial camp at Akhterine for several months after my departure, and was there when it was besieged by the angry peasants, had already become well known on the Palestine frontier. He very quickly had the distinction of seeing his name on the N.M.O. black-list of "enemies" of Zionism. When the Jewish terrorist strikes down his enemies he shoots only to kill. W——, of course, ignored the warning; to him, as to the Palestine police, the terrorists were what is known in the army as a "shower". He felt sure that no individual terrorist would stand up to a fair fight, man to man, either with pistol or fist. If you travel about Palestine as a marked man, with your wits about you and your pistol safety-catch released, the terrorist will have a job to get you. If you make a habit of standing in a queue or eating in the same restaurant, your chances are not so good.

Bint Jbail, translated into English, means Maid of the Mountains. It is close to the Palestine frontier in the extreme south-east corner of the Lebanon, and is not far from Mt. Canaan. I had been to Bint Jbail during my stay at Merjayoun, so I knew to what desolation I was going. I relieved two colleagues and a driver who had been there for eight months, but I did not know that my spell in the detestable place was to last only a few weeks. A man who can stick Bint Jbail for eight months must be a man of great patience and strong constitution. A third-class "road" is a flattering description for the track that runs up the twenty-eight miles from the coastal town of Tyre to Bint Jbail. It is the only fair track in the whole wild mountain area. The other tracks were scarcely fit for a jeep. My predecessors'

jeep averaged thirty punctures a month, and at times got as many as six in a day.

The residence was the upper floor of a crumbling and very dilapidated Arab house. It had four rooms, kitchen and a cubby-hole which could only be given the undignified title of latrine. In the sixteen window-frames there were less than ten intact panes of glass, and very few undamaged wooden shutters. When I surveyed the premises closely, I could only conclude that my predecessors had adopted the *ma'aleesh* — the resigned — attitude. The house belonged to a gendarme, who lived downstairs with his mother. An annex to the ground floor served as the women's prison, which consisted of one room. My windows and balcony looked down on a courtyard that served as stable for the gendarme's horse. I quickly noticed that the gendarme's mother kept a sharp eye on the horse, collecting the animal's droppings before they had time to cool off. She scooped them up in her bare hands, climbed a short ladder and spread them out to dry in the sun on the roof of the prison-annex. This roof was a yard from my balcony, and when the myriads of flies had finished lunching on the horse droppings they came into my kitchen for the dessert. In a corner of the yard, which served as stable, and as exercise ground for the five women prisoners, was a crude wooden cabin. This was the other W.C. (Without Chain), which, if anything, was probably a little more sanitary than mine.

Few houses at Bint Jbail, a "town" of some 5000 inhabitants, have a well deep enough to secure a constant all-the-year supply of fresh water. Most of them depend on shallow wells which are filled in the winter when the rains swill down the stale, summer-dry streets and alleys, collecting the garbage, goat and sheep dungs, and all the stains and rubbish, and sweep them into the wells. This water serves all purposes — drinking, laundry and personal ablutions, and must suffice until the next winter. Inhabitants who ran quickly out of water could buy a regular supply from the

water-boys. The price was 10 Palestinian mils a bucketful. It revealed, amongst other sediment, when poured into a glass, minute wriggly leeches. Army personnel are supposed to chlorinate their water, but such little luxuries as chlorinating tablets were not always obtainable. Army stores had a remarkable habit of being deficient in just those things that were useful. The nearest fresh water was in Palestine at a camp of the Arab Legion, about ten miles away. I managed occasionally to bring back a four-gallon tinful, strapped on the carrier of the bike.

You can exercise all the will-power and determination on which you can draw in your efforts to live up to European standards, but in a spot like Bint Jbail you fail, and you just have to live like the backward Metwalis. If you are to do your work with any efficiency and personal satisfaction you have no time to attend to the enormous task of living above Metwali standards. At Akhterine I was thirty miles from a café or a cinema, but as compensation I had had the jovial company of customs and railway officials. The nearest cinema to Bint Jbail was a bug-pit at Tyre, twenty-eight miles away, and the nearest one clean enough for my modest taste was at Haifa, some fifty miles away. I had long since regarded cinemas as a luxury beyond my physical reach, and as far as I was concerned it would make no difference if they were all scrapped. Of restaurants and cafés I could say much the same, though I sometimes sought them out at such places as Rosh Pinna, Tiberias and Safad.

Track travel by motor cycle around Bint Jbail was a job in itself, and amongst the rocks, flints and boulders your speed is reduced for the most part to five to eight miles an hour. There is no escape from the large number of pariah dogs which, maddened by hunger, attack the solitary traveller in the wild mountain country. When, after a few days, I found my trouser-legs getting torn to shreds by hungry teeth, my pistol became the only solution to the annoyance. At Bint Jbail the village dogs took the place of the football one sees

on English sports grounds. Almost every day I saw boys stoning dogs, tying their hind-legs together, dragging the wretched animals along backwards and hurling them against stone walls. It was a common sight to see the bodies of dogs decomposing with an awful stench in the village alleys, feeding black clusters of flies. It was nobody's business to remove the rotting flesh. The village urchins also tortured cats, chickens and wild birds. These latter they trapped very adeptly or catapulted from the few trees : they would then tie their legs to a length of string and swing them about, whilst the birds fluttered desperately to escape. The R.S.P.C.A. would not have found a moment's rest at the Maid of the Mountains. I often shook my head in bewilderment at such a vile place possessing such a romantic name. The less said about sex perversion and sodomy at Bint Jbail the better. I have travelled a lot, and seen some queer places and queer things, but Bint Jbail in every aspect of its daily life had something new to offer. It was like being down amongst the very dregs of human kind.

The weekly market was a Mecca for thousands of Metwali peasants, who were offered anything from silks to camel meat. The meat stalls deserve mention. The stall-holders would start slaughtering their sheep, goats and camels at two o'clock in the morning. Each stall was a slaughter-house. At about nine o'clock, when the sun was high and getting hot, a walk around the meat market was a walk through bloody carnage. Masses of offal, bones, meat and blood-stained skins lay at the foot of the stalls. The dark blood patches on the ground were rapidly drying under the suction of myriads of fly mouths. One morning I stepped on what I thought was a dark sack, and saw it was a skin of a sheep only when my feet had disturbed the flies, which rose in a roaring swarm. Words cannot describe the peculiar stench of the whole market. It was a smell from another world. Once or twice I bought some tender sheep meat in the market, and the flies on it were so tame that they only moved to crawl away from the

butcher's knife. Often, as I wandered around, the butchers would shout : "Ta, chawish ; ta l'a hon. Lahm kuwayyis" ("Come, Sergeant ; come here. Choice meat").

One had to eat something in that world-forsaken mountain village. The nearest Naafi bulk-issue ration store at which I was permitted to make purchases was at Beirut, eighty-five miles away, too far to enable one to live on Naafi tinned food. My predecessors had managed to make shift during eight months, so it could be done again. Vegetables and rice did not exist, and the scarce fruit was too dirty and expensive by the time it reached the village from the coast. I complained somewhat unfairly about the place, not so much at the conditions themselves, but at the loss of time in overcoming them. When you are constantly faced with the problem of the next meal and the next drink, you cannot put your mind on your job.

The Metwali is intensely religious. In the centre of the village of Bint Jbail was the bkerke, the rough reservoir that collects the winter rains sent by Allah. This water is communal property, and possesses the qualities attributed to holy water. The bkerke was about thirty yards by ten. By late summer the water looks like anything but water ; it is a greeny brown, it is stagnant and dirty, but it is still the same precious gift sent down from heaven by Allah for the use of his devotees. Many housewives in the village made a practice of taking household linen and clothing, washed beautifully clean in the house, to the pond, where they rinsed it out in the stinking murky holy water. If the bkerke was used as a rubbish dump, if village boys piddled in it, if donkeys and mules cooled themselves in it, it did not matter. The clean clothes had to be immersed and rinsed in bkerke water. They were taken back to the house and put out in the sun to dry, as dirty as they were before they were washed. It was a peculiar aspect of Shia Moslem religious customs.

Lebanese money had no circulation in this Lebanese village. Apart from the cultivation of tobacco the only local

industry was smuggling, and every single family was engaged in it. Contraband by pack animal passed nightly into Palestine, unmolested by the British Customs authorities, since the goods helped Palestine economy. The smugglers returned next day, their pockets stuffed with Palestinian currency, which alone had circulation in the village. There was a strong detachment of Lebanese Customs officers stationed in the village in order to prevent smuggling. One of the officers told me that he and each of his colleagues, in addition to their miserable basic pay, made £70 a month out of a common pool into which went the proceeds of seizures. Their share was 18 per cent ; the rest went to the government. In addition, the Customs men handed in far less than they " seized ", and also made a handsome income out of bribe money. In the Orient bribery is not regarded as a serious offence. It is a tradition in many places for each man and rank in a public service to make a monthly cash present to his immediate superior. This gift system ensures that each rank will protect the interests of the rank or men below him. Since basic pay is so small the gift money has to be found elsewhere. Hence the widespread and accepted system of bribery.

The brief stay at Bint Jbail was brightened by the women prisoners in the one-roomed gaol. There was an Armenian girl of 20 who had come from Jerusalem and had crossed the frontier without a passport to go to Beirut to find her brother who had decamped with the family savings. She had been caught after tramping all night over the hills from Palestine. The girl must have had plenty of courage or a total absence of sense, since any person of European appearance (as Armenians are), whether man or woman, who ventures alone into the wild south Lebanon country, is asking to be murdered. Then there was a Jewish woman with her two pretty daughters, who had been caught when trying to enter Palestine. The fifth prisoner was a Lebanese woman of some vintage who described herself as a night-club

hostess. At a respectable distance she looked like one ; close up she did not look so good. She had been caught trying to enter Palestine without papers ; she was hoping to work in a night club in Haifa. At night she left her fellow prisoners and slipped into the gendarme's quarters downstairs, where, no doubt, prison life had its compensations.

My colleague who had been with me at Merjayoun all the summer came to take over from me. He liked a solitary and lonely life, and volunteered to stay alone at Bint Jbail. He might have lost his life through not obeying standing orders to be armed when away from the billet. Walking alone in the mountains one evening, not three miles from the village, he was stopped by a dozen Metwalis, who mistook him for a Jew trying to get into Palestine. He was trapped ; had he been armed he could have shot his way clear. But he had nothing but his bare fists, which were of little use against a dozen men. Protests that he was a British soldier did not help. They retorted that he was a yehoudi disguised as a British soldier. He showed them his army papers, but, of course, they could not read. He must have suffered acute mental anguish when he realised there was no escape. But he proved himself a man fit for his job, full of resource and knowledge. My successor was of a very religious turn of mind and always carried a prayer-book in his pocket. With a last-minute inspiration he produced it, and showed his illiterate captors the Christian cross on the cover and on the inside page. He spoke fair Arabic, and asked them : "Would a Jew carry with him a book that has the Christian cross in it ?" Reluctantly they agreed, for if Metwalis are illiterate, they know all about religious symbols. They knew that Jews would never have pictures of Christian symbols about them. They let the sergeant go free, but without apology told him that it was only the cross in the book that had earned him his freedom.

To the illiterate and fanatical Metwalis a European Jew is a Zionist, and is like a red rag to a bull. They will tolerate

the oriental Jew, but the European Jew — never. To kill a lonely European Jew wandering in Metwali country would be merely fulfilling a religious duty. Had they killed my colleague none would ever have known how he had disappeared, for amongst themselves the Metwalis know how to keep a secret. A quarter of the population of the Lebanon is made up of Metwali Moslems, of whom at least 95 per cent are totally illiterate. All of them, without any exceptions, are religious fanatics, and just beneath their placid temperamental surface exists a volcanic religious element that requires but little provocation to break forth into violent expression. I was warned by responsible personalities in south Lebanon that unless Britain ceased being pro-Zionist and unless she shut the door on further immigration of Jews from Europe, the Arabs would solve the Palestine problem themselves. I saw enough of the Metwalis and their intelligent and cultured chieftains to realise that their warning was not empty words.



## Part Seven



### *CHAPTER XXXVIII*

### NEW PHOENICIA

EVERY Englishman longs to escape, if only for a brief spell, from the grey skies, the murky fogs, the chilly winters and the wet summers of his island home. Our climate, if we pause to reflect a few moments, has helped to mould the national character, and has given the British people those qualities of patience, perseverance and tenacity that have, more than once, stood the whole world in good stead and brought it back to a sane progressive course. But we English still think the sun is better for us. We want to go where we can feel the balmy air and the warm touch of the sun, and relax on golden sands amidst an abundance of luscious fruits and other good things. Few of us can make our dreams come true, so our literature soothes us with romantic escapist tales of life in the South Seas and the warmer regions of the Americas. Names of romantic places that bask under the palms and the perpetual sun haunt us through the years. Two such romantic names have lurked at the back of my mind since early childhood : Tyre and Phoenicia. To many of us Cornishmen Phoenicia comes first in romantic wishful thinking, probably because we have a legend that the Phoenicians were the earliest traders in Cornish tin. I have always wanted to see Phoenicia and Tyre, but never in the wildest flights of romantic imagination did it ever occur to me that I would one day live in what was the capital of ancient Phoenicia.

Tyre exceeded my expectations. Whether you are in it or see it from the hills ten miles away reaching into the bluest of smooth seas, it is a garden of Eden, a terrestrial paradise,

a corner of the South Seas on the shores of the Mediterranean. It is so much at peace with man and nature that the whole atmosphere suggests that in this respect it has reached a state of ultimate perfection. Nature could not be more generous than at Tyre. A hot golden November sun tempered by soft cooling breezes, a sapphire sea with a limpid surface sending the smallest of ripples against the shore, waving palm fronds standing against an azure sky, and miles of golden sands were some of nature's more obvious gifts.

Tyre stands nearly two miles out in the Mediterranean. It was an island until the conquering Alexander built a causeway that has been softened and curved by the silted sands into the narrow isthmus which now links the town with the rocky Lebanese coast. My bedroom window looked down across a garden of palms, banana and orange trees to the sea on the northern side. The front balcony opened on to the westward seashore, littered with concrete Phoenician foundations and groups of granite pillars that have withstood the erosion of the tides for 3000 years. The maze of quaint narrow streets and alleys never sees wheeled traffic; the huge harbour wall shelters Levantine brigantines and schooners, and the nets of fishermen are always spread out for repair and drying on the old quaysides. The stillness and sleepy rhythm of the perfectly parochial life of the town are only occasionally disturbed. Boys fish with lines from the little wooden pier, old fishermen are always bent over their nets, dogs sleeping in the shade only flick an ear to drive off enormous buzzing blue-bottles, and small groups of mediocre, shabby, gossiping men seem to shun the dusky, dark-haired and unveiled Lebanese girls. The granite columns and the foundations of the ancient Phoenician city stand in shallow water all along the shore, and the beaches are covered with a myriad pieces of Phoenician glass and glazed pottery, broken slabs of carved marble, and the little cemented cubes of stone once used for tessellating the floors of Phoenician and Roman houses, many of which still stand, like the shells of blitzed

buildings, above the high tide mark.

Were Tyre anywhere in Europe it would be a nation's most treasured possession, but in the Orient where the various countries are strewn with historical ruins, no one shows an interest in it. For this reason it is well preserved. In Europe a sea-front promenade, hotels, cocktail bars, whelk stalls, swimming pools, amusement parks and a host of social parasites would settle amongst its ruins; but where it is, Tyre is spared the distracting amenities of Western culture. It is neglected by its citizens and the government alike, and only a few local down-and-out beachcombers show an active interest in the place. The Phoenician treasures are reputed to have been dumped in the sea when Alexander came to subdue the island. Much legend surrounds the treasures, but no one knows how much there is. Proof of their existence has been provided by storms occasionally throwing a cask of powdered gold up on to the beaches. Such storm-sent wealth is claimed by the Lebanese Government.

The prophet Ezekiel devotes chapters xxvi, xxvii and xxviii of his book to the story of Tyre. They are amongst the most interesting and remarkable chapters of the Old Testament. He describes the wealth, commerce, industries and the corruption and state of immorality of Phoenician Tyre, and foretells its fall as a punishment for having set itself against the people of Israel. The Tyre of 1946 is an accurate fulfilment of the prophecy, for it has truly been reduced to "a place for the spreading of nets in the midst of the sea". The last two verses of chapter xxviii foretell precisely what is going on in Palestine to-day. Verse 25 reads: "Thus saith the Lord God: When I shall have gathered the house of Israel from the people amongst whom they are scattered, and shall be sanctified in them in the sight of the heathen, then shall they dwell in their land that I have given to my servant Jacob." And verse 26: "And they shall dwell safely therein, and shall build houses, and plant vineyards; yea, they shall dwell therein with confidence, when I have executed

judgments upon all those that despise them round about them. . . .”

A Moslem intellectual, acquainted with the words of Ezekiel, said to me: “ You English are clever people. You know the Bible, and have learned from it that those who set themselves against the Jews are punished. Tyre was destroyed because of it. Germany has just been destroyed. And fearing that Britain too will be punished if you keep the Jews out of Palestine, you let them flow freely into the country. In giving Palestine to the Jews you hope to save the British Empire from the wrath of God. Am I right ? ”

Phoenicia was the Great Britain of the ancient biblical world. The Phoenicians devoted their energies not to classical culture, but to shopkeeping, commerce and seafaring. Like Britain, Phoenicia in her epoch was the leading maritime and commercial power, and carried her trade to distant outposts, where her merchants exchanged their produce and manufactured goods for the produce and raw materials of other lands.

The local archaeological and historical “ experts ” could tell me little about ancient Tyre. Their knowledge was legendary to the extent that Britain became a seafaring nation thanks to navigational secrets learned from the Phoenicians, and that the English language has developed from Phoenician beginnings. In vain I searched for information and for reliable works by historians. I had to be content with the imaginative tales of the local pundits, with exploring the ruins and combing the beaches. One can take a rowing-boat to the “ Egyptian ” harbour south of the town, and, by peering down through the clear water, see the submerged concrete foundations of three streets built by the Phoenicians as breakwaters. They are each 32 metres wide and about 3000 metres long, and are now about 10 feet below the surface. Each street has a carriageway 8 metres wide down the middle, with 12 metres each side where the houses once stood. The sunken remains of many concrete walls and streets go out

from the beaches into shallow water off the shore. The concrete is remarkably hard and durable; time has proved its qualities and the workmanship put into it.

Like all historical ruins, contemporary Tyre is but a shadow of what it was. It stands utterly still in the timeless sleepy rhythm in which the whole of the Middle East is drifting towards a state of complete human and cultural decadence. At Tyre more than anywhere else the European senses an uncanny atmosphere that suggests the unnatural stillness before the impending doom.

Of all the places on the extensive shores of the Mediterranean, Tyre remained, for British army circles, the most mysterious. After 1941 it was placed permanently out of bounds, for a very unusual reason, to all British and Imperial troops. All over the East a legendary reputation grew around the name, and enshrouded it in all the mystery and secrecy of the Orient. Only the members of the Field Security Service who had to work and live there were allowed officially to set foot in the place.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### TYRIAN TRIVIALITIES

TYRE was sociable, friendly, homely and gossipy. Two religions and many sects lived side by side without conflict. There were 3000 Christians and about 4000 Moslems. The Christians consisted of Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics, and a large community of exiled Armenians, who were settled in a colony at the head of the isthmus, a mile or two from the town. A few miles south of Tyre was another Armenian settlement, numbering several hundreds. The Armenians were largely Catholics, with a sprinkling of Protestants. They had all been driven from the Sanjak of Alexandretta during the Turkish aggression in 1939.

There were no signs of cold weather, although autumn was ending. Perhaps once a week there would be a severe storm and the Mediterranean suddenly looked like the wintry north Atlantic, but the next six days would again see a placid blue sea sending gentle ripples up the golden sands. Stormy incidents, like the rough weather, occasionally broke the sleepy stillness of the life of the town. One day a gunman with seven killings to his credit, and released after many years in gaol, came back to Tyre in violation of a police ban. He had a bodyguard with him, and was returning to carry out a 15-year-old family vendetta. His enemies had been given the tip that he was coming to add another to his list of victims, and hastily prepared for his visit behind a sandbagged barricade. The killer and his bodyguard arrived, and under a street lamp a desperate gun-fight took place in which there were killed and injured. Such an occasional major incident and numerous minor ones kept the female tongues wagging in the Christian quarter. Husbands and sons were all fisher-

men and sailors, who ran their wooden brigantines in the Levantine coastal traffic between Famagusta in Cyprus and Port Said. Sometimes a husband or a son came home with hand or fingers blown off, which resulted from their careless use of dynamite. Net fishing was far too slow and laborious for them. Their method was to spread bread upon the waters, wait a few minutes for the fish to gather, hurl a small stick of dynamite, and then dive in stark naked to gather the floating wreckage of dead fish. A stick would bring up anything from one to a couple of dozen fish of all species, sizes and shapes, including flying fish. Whenever a fisherman got injured, the women had something to talk about as a relief from their usual scandal, rumour and titbits of unpublished news about their neighbours.

A Greek Orthodox wedding between cousins was full of interest. As guest of honour I sat on the settee with the happy couple. The room, though small, was about large enough to admit some fifty people, all of them interrelated and related to both bride and groom. There were babies in arms and grandfathers. Bride and groom received their aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews and then sat nervously holding hands while awaiting the arrival of the three priests. Two small girls annoyed the bride by persistently asking her to play with them. The guests sat or stood in groups, gossiping, smoking and enjoying shrieks of laughter, and none paid the slightest attention to the bride in all her wedding finery. The beffrocked and bearded priests arrived and joined in the gossiping. Finally they spread out their books, a silver cross and other paraphernalia, motioned the parents of the couple out of the room and beckoned the latter to the table. They gabbled fast through the wedding service, which lasted a full hour. One gabbled in Arabic, a second in Greek, whilst the third came up in the rear in rather uncertain ancient Syriac. The noisy chatter and smoking continued, and only the official witnesses showed any interest in the ceremony. When the bride had to answer

“Yes,” words failed her, and the priest repeated the question in a loud voice, whereupon half a dozen people, including two children, shouted “Naam” (“Yes”). The priest got angry, announced that he was addressing the bride, and that if he could not have silence he would empty the room.

Two tables laden with food and arak were brought in, but only the men sat at them, the women and children being obliged to take a back seat and be content with what was passed to them over the men’s shoulders. The newly-weds, sitting behind me, were not allowed by their religion to eat or drink until the next day. When the party grew noisy I slipped a few glasses of arak to the bridegroom, who drank them by concealing himself behind my chair and kneeling on the floor. It seemed an injustice that a man could not steady his nerves on his wedding-day with a drop of alcohol.

There was music and song, produced by a violin, an accordion and a mandolin, implemented by lusty voices. A fight broke out between two men over the bride’s pretty sister. Both were drunk, and one of them was thrown out, only to return later and apologise to the bride. He planted himself at her side and she, brave girl, put up with him and soon found herself mothering the great hulk of a youth. He ended his display by falling asleep with his head on her shoulder, but the husband did nothing, fearing another free fight. The proceedings culminated in an embarrassing moment when the “orchestra” strummed “God save the King”. Some people stood, others could not, while a dozen children grouped themselves together and sang all the verses of the anthem in Arabic.

Tyrian Christians and Moslems alike were without initiative or enterprise. In this respect it was just like Merjayoun. One section of Christians wanted to know when the town and district would be annexed to Palestine. That it would be was already decided: they wanted me to tell them the exact date of the transfer. These pro-British elements saw no future for the town except under British

administration and Jewish enterprise. They were in favour of Jews settling at Tyre to get the citrus fruit industry commercially and scientifically reorganised. Vast orange groves near the town produced a fruit even superior to the Jaffa orange, but the zealots were not satisfied. In the days of the Ottoman Empire Tyre was a part of southern Syria, which included the whole of Palestine. Tyre still looks south, for south of the border it has many family and economic links. The River Litani, which falls into the sea some five miles north of the town, is regarded as the natural southern boundary of Lebanon, and the sooner the river becomes the Lebano-Palestinian frontier the more pleased will be the Christians of the town.

An ambitious Christian outlined a locally popular plan to make Tyre an important centre again. He was a man of considerable influence, being one of the local moukhtars and regarded by his fellow townsmen as an authority on historical, economic and archaeological matters. Briefly, his plan was that the Americans should construct an oil pipe-line from Iraq to Tyre and the British rebuild the port and bring the military railway, which skirts the head of the isthmus, into the town. "Then," he concluded very simply, "we shall be famous again. There will be trade, and zip, plenty of money." British and Americans do all the work so that Tyrians may sit back and (zip) reap a handsome profit! Such was the naïve mentality of leading Tyrian citizens. They lived in a delightful dream-world.

As a British subject I was called upon by anyone who thought he was entitled to my help. Much of my time was taken up politely and diplomatically refusing to help people. A young woman came fluttering in one morning and thrust her British passport under my nose. "I am a British subject," she said in French; "I want you to arrest a man who keeps following me about." I told her to go and relate her tale to the gendarmes, but she came back with all her family, who assured me that I was the only authority in the

town which they recognised. Bits and pieces were added to the story until it became a chronicle of the Christian quarter. There was more in the whole affair than met my eye, and I failed to convince the family that I had no authority to arrest civilians for civil offences. I was not a policeman. Having other things on my mind, I sent for the gendarmes, who came and took charge of my visitors and their case.

A young man, in spite of my warnings, credited me with having the power to issue Palestine identity cards to Lebanese citizens. He just felt he wanted to go to Palestine, and pestered me for weeks to give him the document he wanted. He was too lazy to make a written application to the Lebanese Passport Office. It required less effort to walk up my steps and make repeated verbal requests. One day when motor-cycling just outside Haifa I met this individual tramping along the road. I pulled up and asked him how he had got into Palestine. "I walked over the hills," he answered. It was as easy as all that, yet he worried me for weeks.

One day the English driver of a capsized army lorry was brought by some Lebanese into Tyre so that I could give him medical attention. I was out, and an hour passed before I was found. And although some 300 men and youths had been standing and staring at the injured soldier for an hour, not one of them had the initiative to give first aid. Twenty yards away from the soldier, who was covered in his own blood and could neither move nor speak, was an open pharmacy, and only ten yards away was the office of the town *gendarmerie*, with about ten gendarmes on duty. The inert, apathetic mob were less helpful than children. Their callous indifference was not due to any anti-British sentiment ; they would have behaved in precisely the same way had the injured man been one of their own.

One day I met with a really classic example of Arab callousness. Travelling down the Beirut-Haifa road I saw an army staff car in front of me knock down a child. The occupants, the driver, a corporal and two officers, promptly got

out and gave first aid. One went to fetch water, and another to a café half a mile away to report the accident by telephone to the *gendarmerie*. There was, of course, nothing unusual about all this. But no Tyrian would have had the initiative to do any of these little things. Presently the boy's mother came running up, threw a glance at her unconscious son and promptly put on an act of hysteria. She clutched at the major's clothing, she tugged at his driver's clothing, she grabbed me by the arm, she thrust out her hands in a begging gesture, and all the while between her screams she yelled: "Masari ! Masari ! Masari !" ("Money ! Money ! Money !"). The callous woman had not a thought and did not a thing for her son. After her first glance she did not even look at him. What was far more important was immediate cash compensation. Fortunately the boy was not seriously hurt.

The incidents, typical of so many that happened at Tyre, exposed some bad faults in the Arab character. The indifference and total lack of any initiative were astonishing. I was sometimes glad to get away up into the hills in the region of the Palestine frontier. There was an occasional Christian village in this Metwali country, and it was interesting to encounter two totally different attitudes towards the Jewish question. The Metwalis were fanatically anti-Zionist, and would not hesitate to attack any solitary stranger who looked like a European and was foolish enough to wander in the hills. The Metwalis would summarily decide that he was a European Jew.

By contrast the Christian peasants were pro-Zionist, and there was ample evidence of their active co-operation with Jewish immigrants and smugglers. From Ras Naqoura on the Phoenician coast, as far inland as Bint Jbail, the frontier was virtually wide open to the Jews for all purposes, thanks to their Christian Arab collaborators. During my period in the area, when I worked from Tyre, the moukhtar of the Catholic village of Alma Sha'ab, which stands just across

the frontier from the Jewish colonies of Hanuta and Eilon, was warned by Arab officials in Palestine to cease his pro-Zionist activities. He was regarded as a traitor to the Arab cause. Two of the rackets in which the Christian peasants were said to be assisting the Zionists were entirely new to me. I was confident enough to assume that I had heard of or come across every possible kind of illicit traffic : the existence of two new ones only showed up my lack of imagination or experience. These new activities had been brought into existence as a result of the new Zionist political developments across the frontier, and showed that the peasants in these remote villages were well abreast of developments that were beginning to attract, once again, world attention. As these illicit activities are undoubtedly still continuing, nothing can be gained by my describing them here.

I had to prowl often in the roadless hills close to the frontier and noticed a marked resentment to my presence if I showed signs of lingering longer than an hour or two in a Christian village. The local gendarmes were particularly hostile and aloof. I met with little success in my work, for the Christians, suspecting my reasons for being there, were cutting the grass from under my feet. I felt a very acute sense of frustration.

The trifling, petty incidents at Tyre, and the behaviour of the Christian peasants in the hills, were irritating. I liked the people of Tyre, and many in the villages, but they were utterly lifeless, devoid of all initiative and totally lacking in moral principles and all sense of responsibility. They came to me with all their woes and troubles, but did not want to see me if they were running flourishing rackets. Their indifference, their callousness and their laziness often roused my blood. I often longed to turn my back on the town. When feeling particularly frustrated or annoyed, I would jump on my motor-bike and run the twenty-five miles down to Nahariya, a Jewish seaside resort just north of Haifa Bay, and take a glass of beer amongst the German Jews of the

village. Nahariya — and indeed any Jewish village — was a safety-valve for touchy and irritable Englishmen. My sentiments were neither pro-Jewish nor pro-Arab : I tried to like and admire them both, and tried to understand them both. But there were moments when I found myself intensely disliking the Arabs, whether Christian or Moslem, and transferring all my sympathy to the Jews. The short journey from Tyre to Nahariya was like going from the Orient to Europe, for the Jews lived not in dreamland, but in a world of stark active reality, tackling their problems with unequalled zest. They had not the time to talk of chimerical pipe-lines, harbours and railway lines, but sat all day in the seats of their tractors or dug irrigation channels in their orange groves.

The self-imposed aloofness of the French Political Officer at Tyre, with his appallingly childish anti-British sentiments, was another good reason which often sent me escaping to Palestine. He sent to the H.Q. of the Deuxième Bureau at Beirut a regular list of the names of Tyrians who called at my billet. Many of my friends, to avoid being thus black-listed by the French, would not visit me, and, instead, I called on them. It was the winter of 1945, the war was finished and done with, yet here was the representative of France playing a war-time Gestapo game. The obsession of the French that the British were employing *agents provocateurs* in isolated places (members of the Field Security) to stir up Arab sentiment against them seemed to preoccupy them to the exclusion of all else.

A young Tyrian one day applied to the French Political Officer for a *visa* to go to Senegal to join his uncle who was a merchant at Dakar. He was refused the *visa* on the grounds that one of his friends was a frequent visitor to my billet. The French officer told him that, quite frankly, in as few words. The young Tyrian himself did not know me personally, but we both happened to be acquainted with a doctor who often came to my place for a drink and who was, admittedly, openly pro-British. The young man's acquaintance

with this doctor therefore automatically placed him on the French black-list. That Lebanese citizens could in their own country be black-listed by the Political Agent of a foreign Power was, since the war was finished, mean and despicable. Here again was proof, if any more were required, why the French, right up to the last days of their Mandate, got themselves intensely disliked by the Lebanese. According to de Gaulle, anti-French feeling in the Levant States was due almost entirely to British agents inciting the Arabs against the French. This accusation against the British was made public after the French had bombarded Damascus. Such "agents" as there were — and the only "agents" who lived amongst the Arabs were we small fry of the Field Security Service — actually went out of their way to further the French cause, often to the deception of their Arab friends. Many of these accused us of being anti-Arab since we were so openly pro-French. They concluded that being pro-French meant being in favour of the French remaining in the Levant. Our instructions were to speak well of all our Allies, and not to discuss the pros and cons of the French Mandate.

## CHAPTER XL

### THE ARMENIANS GO TO RUSSIA

ALL over the Middle East live large communities of Armenians, especially in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Lebanon and Greece. The Armenians are an ancient people of Christian religion, and have survived repeated persecutions and massacres at the hands of the Moslems — mainly Turkish Moslems — amongst whom they have always lived. Their original home is the geographical area known as Armenia, of which the western half now consists of the six main provinces of eastern Turkey. The eastern half is the Soviet Republic of Armenia. Driven out of their mountain fastnesses of eastern Turkey, the exiles have settled in many parts of the Middle East. Of the larger Armenian communities Aleppo has 100,000 refugees, Beirut about 50,000, whilst there are large groups in such towns as Teheran, Tabriz, Mosul, Baghdad, Kamichlié, Kessab and Tyre. There are still 250,000 in Turkish Armenia, whose capital is Erzerum.

The persecution of the Armenians has gone on throughout many centuries, and the worst massacres took place in the first German war when the Turks wiped out one and a half millions of them. The most recent persecution was in 1939 when France, preoccupied with Hitler, saw herself compelled to sign away the Syrian Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey. The Turks confiscated the lands and property of thousands of Christians, including a large proportion of Armenians, and the victims who were not imprisoned were forced to flee southwards to Syria and the Lebanon. The French found homes for these refugees.

With the exception of the 50,000 Armenians in Greece

(who are still Turkish subjects) the refugees who have fled from their homes and resettled at various times in other countries, have been granted the nationality of their country of adoption. The Armenians of Iran are thus "Persians", those in Syria are "Syrians", whilst those who settled in Cairo have become "Egyptians". The unfortunate Armenians do not expect to find permanent freedom from religious persecution anywhere in the Moslem world. Their sufferings began before the Crusader epoch: the 1939 episode, though mild, is not a hopeful sign for the future. No exiled people has a stronger or more just claim to the restoration of its homeland. The mountains of Armenia are as much home to them as are the Highlands to the people of Scotland.

The Armenians are not, as many people believe, one of "those backward oriental races". Though oriental by virtue of long residence none knows with certainty whence they came. They have all the appearances and characteristics of a European people. I have often mistaken Armenians for Frenchmen: if you saw an Armenian in London you would pass him off as just another European, or even an Englishman. Strongly religious, the Armenians have preserved their own culture and language. They are educated and progressive, and when a community is rooted out of its home and forced to settle elsewhere it immediately opens churches and schools. By tradition they are a pastoral people, and practice many handicrafts. In the larger towns, such as Aleppo and Beirut, they turn their hand to many trades and professions, and become highly skilled as doctors, dentists, lawyers, mechanics, engineers, linguists and merchants. Many of them in the towns also practise some of their ancient crafts, such as embroidery, woodwork and ornamental jewellery. The village communities produce large surpluses of high quality butter, milk and cheese, in spite of the long months of sunshine when all grass disappears. Illiteracy is unknown. In Aleppo and Beirut there are several daily newspapers and magazines published in the Armenian language, and the out-

put of books is, per head, as high as in an average European country.

In their Arab countries of adoption the refugees are well treated and not unhappily settled, able to practise their religion freely and follow their crafts, trades and professions. But they fear the future, for the shadow of Islam hangs heavily over them. They know that, like wars, religious persecution has not yet come to an end. The Armenians are francophile and, to a lesser extent, pro-British, whilst recently they are growing more and more pro-Russian, in spite of their strong religious tendencies. A resurgent Islam and new outbursts of religious fervour are possibilities they find only too real and near. As long as France held the Levant Mandates the Armenians felt secure, but that sense of security has gone. They have already noticed small but significant signs of religious discrimination. I have seen these signs myself, and can understand the fears expressed by these stateless refugees. Islamic persecution can break out on the slightest provocation, especially the kind of provocation generated by political Zionism. Should the Arabs be provoked into a holy war against Zionism the Armenians might come in for some rough handling, for the Moslem fanatic attacks all religions but his own. Responsible Armenians have often spoken to me of the possibilities of joining hands with the Jews in a common defence against Islam.

It is not surprising, therefore, that with the withdrawal of French and British influence in the Levant States the Armenians should look around for a protector, for a Christian power, to come to their immediate aid in the event of religious persecution. They turned to Russia. And Russia, always with a ready ear to listen to the troubles of suffering minorities, has not been slow to respond. We need not here consider what opportunities in this respect Russia will find — or create — to further her own interests in the Middle East. The fact is that there has been a *rapprochement* between communist Russia and the highly religious Armenian communities of

the Levant. The small Armenian communist party in Syria and the Lebanon, with strong centres in Aleppo and Beirut, as early as 1943 was preparing the ground for the event, and was carrying out a pro-Russian propaganda campaign. Russian personalities travelled all over the two countries contacting the religious and political heads of the Armenian communities. Film propaganda from Russia was very successful. Soviet films, documentaries and war newsreels in the Armenian language were fervently applauded in the cinemas of Aleppo and Beirut. I have been in a cinema audience which rose to its feet and cheered the Russian-Armenian General Bagramian for several minutes. It seems deplorable, but none the less true, that General Bagramian ranks next to Stalin and higher than Churchill as a war hero amongst the larger part of Aleppine Armenians. Seventeen other Russian-Armenian Generals are also heroes, and equally as good as Montgomery or Eisenhower.

In 1945 Russia went so far as to open "immigration" offices in Damascus, Beirut and Aleppo, where all Armenians who wanted to migrate to Soviet Armenia could register their names. The Levant governments were apparently not consulted in the matter, and the Russian action was both illegal and immoral, constituting an attempt to entice away citizens of another country. In September 1945 I was informed by a spokesman of the Armenian community at Tyre that Russia had just made an offer of homes in Soviet Armenia to all Levantine Armenians who would agree to settle there. They were guaranteed religious freedom, work and permanent homes. This offer of the U.S.S.R. was made known in one instance at the Annual Congress of the Armenian Protestant Church, held in Beirut. Yet only a month before this Congress was held, my informant, who was the head of a very religious community, had told me that the Armenians of Tyre had no desire to settle in a country where communism reigned. But once the official Russian offer had been made known the whole community at Tyre adopted an attitude favourable to resettle-

ment in the U.S.S.R. The community included both Protestants and Catholics. The same thing was happening all over the Levant amongst the isolated Armenian communities, and it became evident that the U.S.S.R. had won them over. The change-over in sentiment was accelerated by the official announcement of the Anglo-French decision to make a joint withdrawal of their troops. The French and English walk out, both in a cultural and a military sense, whilst the Russians promptly walk in. The latter had appointed themselves, and had been accepted, as the protectors of the "homeless" Armenians. These had been promised a new home which, if it was not their original home, was at least close to it and already inhabited by Armenians.

Apart from the communists, the Levantine Armenians are moderate in their politics, one might say almost conservative. I was often asked if I could — or would — state Britain's policy towards the problem. It was an ordinary everyday question, and came not only from the Armenians, but from every race and religion in the Levant which regarded itself as a minority. As far as I knew, Britain had no policy towards the Armenian problem. I doubt whether any government department had ever given it a thought, though it would not have been for lack of opportunity or knowledge. Many British army men quickly became aware of the Armenian problem, which forced itself on the observer. The French were certainly aware of the unsolved problem, yet did nothing to solve it.

To leave the Armenians where they are, living in scattered communities all over the Levant and the Middle East, is to ask for future trouble. Every minority carries the seeds of trouble, and this one can be at the root of unsettling influences stretching right across the Arab lands. Yet to allow the Armenians to come under the protection of Russia is also asking for trouble, for we know from experience — in Poland and in the Baltic States — that the U.S.S.R.'s interest in minorities is also a territorial one. The minorities and

their welfare count for less than the acquisition of new territory bordering Russia, for the minorities must serve as a buffer between Russia proper and the hostile capitalist world outside. This fate can easily become that of Turkish Armenia.

There are — or were — more than two possible solutions to the Armenian problem. Many Armenians in several parts of the Levant gave me their opinion that their people have a stronger case for a national home than the Jews have. Though hundreds of thousands are scattered over many countries and have been granted the nationality of their country of adoption, they have not been absorbed. They remain in compact and isolated communities, they retain their native tongue (either Turkish or Armenian), they preserve their identity, they practise more strongly than ever their Christian religion, and they have not assimilated Arabic customs, culture or tradition. 250,000 of their kinsmen remain in unbroken residence in their homeland in Turkish Armenia, which the Turks have been arduously trying to transform, during the past twenty years, into Turkish territory — to Turkishise, if you will. The Zionists claim the unbroken residence of Jews in Palestine since the time of the dispersion, but for many centuries the number was less than 50,000. If continuous residence in the "homeland" is a qualification of resettlement, then the Armenian claim is much stronger than the Jewish. The displaced Armenians do not disguise their desire to return to their mountain home, but they would only return there as an independent people freed of Turkish rule. The trend of thought amongst the Levantine Armenians is that it is only a question of time before Turkish Armenia becomes independent, or, alternatively, annexed to Soviet Armenia. Since the Azerbaijan affair, the setting-up of a Democratic Armenian Republic in eastern Turkey comes within the realm of possibility.

The bulk of the Levantine Armenians do not, however, betray a great deal of enthusiasm for Soviet citizenship.

They know that they cannot recover their homeland without Russian help, but they would like to have a completely independent Armenia without coming inside the Russian sphere of influence. The majority of the Levantine Armenians would have preferred resettlement within the British or French Empires. Many of them drew my attention to the mass resettlement in the British Empire of the Chaldeans and Assyrians, and said that the Armenians had been hoping to receive similar treatment. "As the leading Christian power in the Middle East," said an Armenian notable to me, "Britain has a moral responsibility towards us. Like the Assyrians, we are a persecuted people, and we are Christians. We have for many centuries carried the banner of Christianity in a hostile Moslem world. The whole Christian world owes us a debt. But we feel we have been ignored. And now, if we are turning to Russia, it is not by choice. We are driven to it by unfortunate circumstances."

The Armenians approve Britain's efforts to provide a national home for Jews. The Jews now have a national home, and Britain has fulfilled her promise. But the Armenians see themselves continually ignored. Their claim for a national home was staked before the Jewish claim. They have suffered throughout the centuries more than the Jews, and by virtue of their Christian religion they feel they have a double priority to favourable treatment. Nevertheless, their future is taking a new shape. The trek back to Soviet Armenia has begun, and later, at the opportune political moment, a claim will be put in for the restoration of Turkish Armenia to its original owners. None can dispute the Armenian claim, and none can begrudge the restoration of Turkish Armenia to the Armenians. Once the Armenians of the Middle East are back in their mountain home a major problem will have been solved. But as things are proceeding at the present time, an independent or autonomous Armenia can only become a buffer state, like the Baltic States, within the Russian orbit. The Armenians will become the outer crust of the

Russian Empire and the bargaining piece of Russian diplomacy in Asia Minor and the Levant.

It may be as well to point out that Armenia adjoins Kurdistan, and that these two areas together form the greatest threat to Middle East stability. Russia also adjoins the Armenia-Kurdistan danger area. Kurdistan sits astride the Mosul-Kirkuk oilfields, which feed the refineries at Haifa and Tripoli. If any foreign government wants to do an "Azerbaijan" in Kurdistan, it can choose its moment. It is as easy as that, in spite of U.N., high moral principles and solemn promises. Never before has political opportunism been so much to the fore where minorities are involved. I do not attempt to whitewash British and American intrigues for oil in Iran. The danger is that they set an example for others to follow. A Kurdish revolt, fomented and directed by foreign agents, would be an obvious pretext for upsetting the present oil regime in the Middle East. The Armenian is a twin problem to the Kurdish, and a Kurdish revolt would be a signal for the Armenians to strike. There are a quarter of a million of them in eastern Turkey, waiting for their liberation. The "solution" of one problem would inevitably involve the other.

At the present time Kurdistan and Armenia form a broad barrier against Russian penetration into the Levant and an obstacle to Russian ambitions for a port on the Mediterranean. But what happened in Azerbaijan can easily happen elsewhere in the Middle East. Oriental politics are so volatile, so feudalistic, and so confused on account of the medley of religions and races, that a determined and strong power can hardly fail, even to-day, to make an ideological conquest of Kurdistan, Armenia and other areas on the fringe of the Arab lands east of the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER XLI  
THE VOICE OF ISLAM

**M**ETWALI Moslems owe allegiance to patriarchal families only. There are several of these powerful families in the Lebanon, especially in the south, and between them they rule the majority of the 150,000 or more Metwali peasants, most of whom live in the remote mountain villages between the Mediterranean and the Huleh Valley. It is a tradition that these patriarchal families play an active part in the economic and political life of the country. They own vast tracts of land together with the villages on them, whilst the peasants themselves are loyal, willing and obedient serfs.

The patriarchal Metwali families are in a class by themselves. They are the creators and executors of Metwali opinion, and are regarded as the leaders of the Moslem intelligentsia. They are to be found in the forefront of the nation's affairs, and have not a little to say in the formation of home and — such as it is — foreign policy. The government intervenes little in the civil administration of Metwali villages, leaving the settlement of family disputes, minor infringements of the law and so on as the responsibility of the patriarchal family. The peasant takes his orders, directives and inspiration from his tribal chief, and snaps his fingers at the Government, against whose intervention the chief provides a guarantee.

Usually the sons in the patriarchal family receive a university education in England, France or Egypt. They become doctors, lawyers and members of parliament, though one of the brothers or adult sons remains at home to manage what in England would be the estate. He looks after tribal affairs ; settles land disputes between the peasants ; organises

the citrus, wheat and olive-oil crops ; arranges their sale and marketing ; deals with all legal matters and settles inter-tribal quarrels. He uses the patriarchal home as estate office. Not the least important of his duties is to keep in touch with his village moukhtars to feel the pulse of village morale, pass on what information he thinks the villagers should know about politics and the activities of Zionism. When we read of Arab politicians expressing an opinion on the Arab League or the Zionist question we can be sure that the opinion first gained expression through the patriarchal families. All public opinion amongst the Lebanese Metwali peasants is the opinion put out by their chieftains. What the patriarchal families say in unison to-day the Arab League carries out to-morrow. The League stands or falls at the discretion of the great Arab families, both Sunni and Metwali. In the Lebanon the aristocratic Metwali families are the architects of their country's policy in Moslem affairs. Though the government is a Christian one, its policy *vis-à-vis* the neighbouring Moslem states is largely decided by the great Moslem families.

In one respect the patriarchal families of the Lebanon are like the British Foreign Office : they follow a general long-term policy, from which they do not deviate. Amongst them are a few individuals who could be branded as black sheep, almost as traitors to the Arab cause, but, generally speaking, isolated acts of folly are excused and quickly forgotten. The rise of Zionism in Palestine has created a unity amongst all Moslems and brought to the forefront — the immediate forefront — the question of the general welfare of the Arab peoples. The Metwalis, in particular, know they are "up against it" for the first time in their history. Zionism is an obsession with them, it comes up in every conversation, it is whipping up their religious fervour, for in it they see the first real and formidable menace to their very existence.

Many Metwali leaders are shrewd realists. Though aristocrats by Moslem standards, they are, in Western eyes,

something approaching rough diamonds; they are tough, proud, independent, inspired by a high ideal and are ready to fight for it. It is a tradition amongst them that every man in the family must be a fighter. Men of previous generations were fighters against the Turks, and were exiled, tortured or hanged for their ideals. The present generation seek glory in the new fight for Arab independence. In the political sphere they worked unremittingly for the ending of the French Mandate, and succeeded. Now they are fighting against Zionism. Family honour demands that they be in the forefront of the struggle, not only in the political battle, but also on the battlefield when the fighting starts. They will be there.

Speaking fluent English and French, educated in the West, these Metwali aristocrats remain feudal under a democratic veneer, for feudalism is essential if Arab unity and independence are to be achieved. They lead a material existence in Western style, they wear appropriate European clothing for the various occasions, they breed horses of very fine Arab stock, their hospitality does not exclude European meals, and for their lighter amusements they are as much at home in the restaurants and cabarets of Beirut, Tel Aviv and Cairo as the Western aristocrat. They are men of far finer calibre than the aristocratic Christians of the Lebanon, they are broader of vision, keener of intellect, and are not concerned with the makeshift policies that might be modified or set aside at the end of the week. They know what they want. They mean to get it. They are determined men, and in following their ideals they are ruthless. When we appreciate that oriental morality is on a different plane from ours we can understand that their methods, in our eyes, are not always above board. Feudalism prevails, and must continue to prevail to ensure Arab unity: to achieve any aim at all, and in particular to achieve their aim of getting unity in the face of the Zionist threat, their methods have just got to be dictatorial and feudal. Democracy amongst the Metwalis

just does not exist, and the inculcation of this alien creed by education would only create civil strife and disunity amongst the Metwali tribes. The Metwalis are backward and dirty, but it is too late in the day, in view of the anti-Zionist struggle that looms ahead, to do anything about it. Something may be done when the Zionist menace ceases to exist, and ceases to be an obsession in the Metwali mind.

Many people may think that the Arabs, and the Metwalis in particular, could not be worse off than they are now under their feudal leaders. Well-meaning idealists in England and America would like to see Arab patriarchal rule substituted by Western democracy. These idealists have only to look about them to see that their democracy is still a struggling ideal and cannot possibly be applied to the Arabs. They should visit the East and learn that within the patriarchal tribe there is equality and security for every man, something which English democracy has not yet achieved. They should know from Western experience that ignorance and dirt have nothing to do with democracy. Western democracy will not make the Arabs clean, and if it has brought literacy to the masses of Europe and America, the Arabs are gifted with infinitely more wisdom than the peoples of the West. If Arab politicians loudly talk democracy it is only to win the sympathy of democratic countries. They certainly do not practise it, because they know it would be futile to try.

The patriarchal home is the heart and soul of tribal life. In it the peasant is as good as his master, and feels as much at home as he does in his village mud-brick shack. In one particular patriarchal residence I often saw as many as a dozen peasants, sitting amongst rich Persian carpets and soft cushions, waiting their turn to see their chief, or holding a discussion with him. In one palatial room a long table was always set with food and drink, and every peasant, before he returned to his village, was expected to eat a hearty meal. The family looked after their interests within the broad limits of patriarchal practices, and in return the peasants gave their

loyalty and their devotion. The trust was mutual: indeed, it was not a matter of trust, for no matter what happens, no matter how the chieftain behaves, he is assured of the serf's loyalty unto death. It would be indiscreet for me to say here to what extent a chieftain will sometimes go to defend the interests of his serfs. I doubt whether anyone would believe me, for one has to understand something of Moslem fanaticism to appreciate some of the things that happen. Such things could not and do not happen in England. It is therefore apparent that the patriarchal families can wield considerable power, and that their responsibilities are great. They are, however, shrewd and astute enough to use their power always with wisdom and restraint. In spite of their wealth they have been brought up in a hard and difficult school; they are good mixers; they have had Western education and have found out that Arab civilisation, in its basic elements, is as good as, if not better than, the Western.

Wherever I had been in the Levant, whether up north or down in the south, Arabs of all classes had brought up the Zionist question. I quote below some of the opinions gathered over a long period. It must be emphasised, however, that Levantine Arabs harbour no anti-Jewish feelings of the type displayed in various parts of Europe. Arab sentiments are not anti-Jewish, but anti-Zionist. This term, in the Arab mind, is synonymous with "anti-imperialistic".

"The Arab-Jewish question is not a Palestine question. The Jews claim that every Jew in the world is interested in the future of Palestine. We have our answer to that. Every Moslem in the world is also interested in Palestine. If we start a holy war against Zionism every Arab and many non-Arab Moslems will want to make their way to Palestine, from Egypt, from Morocco and from India. But we don't think that the Jews of London and New York will come to Palestine to help their brethren. They are not inspired with the high ideals of the Moslem. They might, of course, send

their money to help their fellows in Palestine, but we don't fear their money."

" By comparison with the Jews we Arabs are illiterate and dirty. But that is not the concern of the Zionists. Our economic condition does not give the Jews the right to develop Palestine, as many of them claim."

" You English and Americans seem to be very worried about the Jews of Europe having lost their homes. You have a saying, I think, that charity begins at home. If you are concerned only with the welfare of homeless Jews, then give them homes. You have room, in America, in Australia, in Africa and elsewhere. If you love them as much as you say (which I doubt) then be good Christians and give them the homes they need. But if you are not prepared to be charitable, then leave them alone, and don't foist them on Palestine. Don't dump them on the Arabs."

" Persecuted Jews ? Homeless Jews ? Yes. They exist in hundreds of thousands. Who persecuted them ? Who took away the homes they have had for hundreds of years ? You Europeans, you Christians. The Arabs are one of the few great peoples who have never ill-treated the Jews. You Christians have always done that. The Arabs of Palestine have made room for at least 600,000 Jews, non-oriental Jews. . . . We have nothing on our conscience, and we think we have done our fair share to give homes to European Jews. How many homes has the British Empire provided for homeless Jews ? How many homeless Jews have the rich Americans taken in ? . . . If the homelessness of European Jews is your worry, then Palestine does not come into it, because there is more room elsewhere and better facilities for settling them elsewhere."

" Zionism is not merely a menace to Palestine. It is a menace to the whole Middle East. We are fully aware of Zionist aims. They want a Jewish Empire in the Middle East. The day will come when they will say that Palestine is too small for them. We have proof that the Zionists want

to expand out of Palestine into the surrounding Arab countries. We know where the Jews have been buying up large tracts of fertile land outside Palestine. In Syria, in the Lebanon and in Iraq they already own large slices of land. They are buying it with American money through Arab intermediaries — traitors. We know who these traitors are. We would not object to a fixed limited population of Jews in Palestine, and we would accept them — we have accepted them — as our contribution for the relief of homeless Jews, provided the Western nations do their share. But they don't. The Jews who come to Palestine from Europe do not conduct themselves as civilised people. You have no right to dump on us European Jews — many of them German subjects before the war — who immediately take up arms and use force to extend their aims. Because we know their aims we are resolved to fight."

"Our quarrel is not with the Jews. They are Semites like ourselves. Our quarrel is with the European Zionists, Jews with blond hair, blue eyes, and German, Czech and Hungarian blood in their veins. These so-called Jews and half-Jews have always been in trouble with the people amongst whom they have lived. European Jews, for reasons best known to themselves and their persecutors, have often been the victims in pogroms and massacres in the Christian countries of Europe. These European Jews have been coming to Palestine in large numbers, and now that they are settled amongst us they are creating trouble. We Arabs object to this mongrel mob of Europeans coming here and stirring up trouble. There was peace in Palestine, and no so-called Arab-Jewish question, until all these Europeans arrived. The European Jew has always succeeded in rousing the anger of the nations who shelter him. Now he is causing us to grow angry."

"We do not dispute the Jewish claim to a home. We think the Jews should be given a home or homes. We Arabs have given them a home, but no one else has. The Jews have

always been welcome and happy amongst the Arabs in many parts of the Orient. We do, however, object to Zionism, and we dispute their pretension that Palestine is the historical home of the Jews. It was, at one time, the home of a large number of Jews, who abandoned it. Abandonment is voluntary renouncement, and you can't expect those who take over to step out again after more than a thousand years residence. You may not agree that we are being asked to step out. True: we are being squeezed out, and we know without the shade of a doubt that the Jews intend to colonise our country and treat us as a subject race. Their plan is to colonise the whole of the Arab lands east of the Mediterranean."

" It is not incumbent on Islam or the Arabs to help the persecuted and homeless Jews of Europe. Don't you feel that since the Christians of Europe are the persecutors of the Jews, the Christians of the world have to atone for the wrong done to the Jews ? Surely it is the responsibility of the Christian world, and not of Islam, to find a place in the world safe enough for the Jews to dwell in. You may argue that the Jews won't accept to go anywhere but Palestine, and that you can't force them to go where they don't want to go. This would be no argument, for the use of force is a Christian privilege, to judge by the history of Christian nations. And are you not forcing us Arabs, against our will, to accept all these European Zionists ? "

" Before the war you British hanged Arab terrorists. To-day you don't hang a single Jewish terrorist. You don't even catch most of them. You have four times as many troops in Palestine as you had during the Arab revolt, so we assume that you don't really want to catch and hang the Jewish terrorists. Your policy in this respect is very disturbing to the Moslem world."

" We will destroy Zionism, even if it takes us 100 years. The Zionists are working fast against time, striving for a strong position. But time has no meaning for us Arabs. We

compare our struggle to that of the Chinese against the Japanese. We have endless time, space and numbers. We will destroy Zionism, no matter what the cost."

" You may wonder how we propose destroying Zionism. Firstly, by our extreme fanaticism. Secondly, by economic strangulation. Thirdly, by guerilla warfare lasting, if necessary, a century. We will make life, by day or by night, utterly intolerable for the Jew. His whole time will be taken up in self-defence. British bayonets will not stop us or protect the Jew. British bayonets to-day cannot even protect British lives against Jewish terrorism. We shall fight the Jews in the same way as they are fighting the British. Every Moslem fighter will make himself responsible for one Jew — one dead Jew — not in open warfare, but by guerilla methods, at which they excel."

" Of all the countries in the world, Palestine is the least safe for the Jews. The Zionists know this. They are not fools. They realise the Jews can only feel safe in Palestine if they are the masters. To achieve their aims it is essential that they reduce us Arabs to a state of subjection. British and American politicians do not seem to understand this simple fact. We Arabs can never co-operate with the Jews so long as Zionism exists."

The leaders of Moslem opinion in the Lebanon are still pro-British, but only because Britain remains the one European power that could help the Arabs to retain Palestine. Their enthusiasm is, however, weakening, for they are becoming more and more convinced that Britain is acting under pressure from the United States, Jewish financial interests and under some obscure motives of her own.

Anyone who mixes a great deal with the Metwali Moslems, from the aristocrat down to the fanatical peasant, cannot fail to be impressed, even disturbed, by their determination to fight Zionism sooner or later. To me, who for more than six months lived in daily contact with Metwali Moslems, the Arab crusade against Zionism seems as certain as to-

morrow's sunrise. It is already decided, and all that is lacking is the mere signal to start it. Yet the intelligent Metwali has nothing against the pure Jew as such. We had to fight the Germans to destroy the Nazis. In the same way the Arabs will have to fight the Jews to destroy the Zionists.

There are many Arab traitors who experience no remorse at aiding the Zionists for financial benefit. These same Arab traitors are as fanatical in their anti-Zionism as those who refuse to sell their aid. The temptation to make easy money, especially in the sale of land at exorbitant prices, is strong enough to cause many Arabs to forget that Zionism is an immediate menace. Should a Moslem crusade against Zionism begin, there would no longer be a Moslem willing to aid a Jew. They would all be in the fight, for it would be a religious war. Zionist fanaticism exceeds even that shown by Hitler's young Nazis, but compared to Moslem fanaticism it is something quiet and mild. The fanaticism of the Moslem is in the blood of every one: he is born with it, and it comes to the surface at the slightest provocation.

The Arabs, though poorly equipped in automatic weapons, are nevertheless not unprepared for a holy war. They know that the Jews are well supplied with modern weapons, but in spite of this they are confident in the outcome of any struggle that might break out. The Arabs are all dour, tenacious and courageous fighters. It is not widely known that the French Brigade which held out at Bir Hakim consisted very largely of Arabs from Syria, the Lebanon and North Africa. They proved not only that they could stand up to a well-armed enemy, but that they were as handy with modern weapons as with the age-old rifle. Thousands of young Arabs have been trained in the mechanised regiments of the Transjordan Frontier Force and the Arab Legion.

The Arabs do not depend on armed hostilities alone. They are numerically too poor in trained troops to sustain a long armed conflict. They rely essentially on a long struggle of attrition which they are prepared to carry on for years.

As long as they occupy all the territory around Jewish Palestine they are likely to retain, if not armed initiative, at least an important strategic, economic and geographical advantage. It may be thought that U.N. will prevent an Arab-Jewish war. But wars to-day can be carried on without armed conflict, which is sometimes merely a more violent and open form of hostile activity. In a silent war of attrition the winning side is likely to be the one that receives the most, and makes the best use of, financial, economic and moral support from outside.

To the Arabs the Palestine question has passed the stage of rights and justice. They no longer argue on these lines, but have passed on to the holy war stage, and it is only natural that the Arab peoples are behind their leaders. It is useless for Europeans and commissions to point out to the Arabs the benefits they are deriving from Jewish settlement. The Arab is not interested in the European way to improvement. But better conditions or not, the Arab will not submit to Zionism.

Many Europeans are inclined to approve Jewish expansion in Palestine because Jewish propaganda puts it out that their development of the country is adding to the world's wealth. Zionists say the Middle East is economically stronger and wealthier as a result of Jewish development. But this argument does not hold water with the Moslems. If the Jewish aim is to increase the world's wealth they can do it faster and much more cheaply in Africa and Australia than in barren Palestine. Moslems are not sentimental about it. They know the Jews do not care tuppence about increasing the world's wealth. The Jews' first interest is the Jewish race.

The Arabs are obsessed with the idea that the Zionists are aiming ultimately at Syria, Iraq, the Lebanon and Trans-jordan. Many of them assert that Zionist Jews have already acquired rich tracts of land as far apart as the Lebanese coast and the River Tigris. Daily, in the Lebanon, I motor-cycled through land, ostensibly owned by a Christian Arab known

to me, that was categorically declared to have been sold by him to Jewish trusts in Palestine.

Another large tract of land in the Lebanon was declared by Arabs, sufficiently well placed to know the truth, to have been for many years the subject of protracted secret negotiations between the owners and Jewish interests. It had not changed hands because the owners could not get the price they wanted.

I have tried in this chapter to interpret the points of view of Levantine Arabs of all classes. The opinions were sometimes given during heated discussions in which reason played but a small role. Many Arabs were ignorant of the higher issues at stake, but all of them regarded Zionism as a menace to their security, independence and way of life. Zionism was nearly always put forward as a form of European exploitation. But what of exploitation by the feudal classes?

Let us look at Zionism from another point of view. Why do Egypt and Iraq show an active interest in Palestine? Is it from purely altruistic motives? Perhaps. But these countries have problems enough with their own wretchedly poor and numerous suppressed classes without assuming further responsibilities. Is not the altruism being shown by Egypt and Iraq merely a cloak for the fear of what Zionism may bring in its train? Education, personal freedom, ample food supplies, public health, industrial activity and commercial vitality, if introduced by the Zionists, would bring undreamt-of prosperity to the Arabs of Palestine. What repercussions would this have on the suppressed classes in Egypt, Iraq and other Arab countries?

The Arab crusade began quietly and in a mild form with the boycott of Jewish manufactured goods. It came into effect on 1st January 1946. It was decided on at a meeting of the Arab League, as a first means of unifying the Arab struggle against Zionism. The boycott aims at a slow strangulation of Jewish economy. The scores — even hundreds — of Jewish workshops and factories at Tel Aviv,

Petah Tikvah and Haifa depend on the vast Arab market for the sale of their products. In closing this market the Arabs hope to create an unemployment problem and an economic crisis in the Jewish community. They know that the shoddy Jewish goods and knick-knacks will never find a market in Europe or Africa. It is a far-sighted aim, and can only succeed within a reasonable period if the co-operation of all Arabs in all countries is given. Already in the autumn of 1945, before the boycott came into effect, an underground smuggling organisation of Arabs had been set up to meet the boycott, and to introduce the boycotted goods into the Levant States. Only the Moslem tribal chieftains can enforce the boycott. They know better than any how to punish Arabs who defy it.

## CHAPTER XLII

### CO-OPERATION OR ANTAGONISM ?

IN 1920 the population of Palestine was 95 per cent Arab. It was more Arab than any other geographical area in the Arab world, with the possible exceptions of Saudi Arabia and Transjordan.

Limited Jewish immigration at first had Arab consent, which was withdrawn when the Arabs began to see that Britain was not fulfilling those parts of the Mandate which guaranteed their independence. We cannot blame the Arabs for resisting large-scale Jewish immigration, or for finally taking up arms to defend the soil of a country that they have occupied for over a thousand years. Let us not be hypocrites. We would have done the same. So would any other people. History proves that every people takes up arms in defence of the place where it has always lived and has its roots. We ourselves, in similar conditions, would have fought for every inch of England, and we would have paid no heed to wise counsellors from outside who might have pleaded with us to be conciliatory and accommodating towards strangers who had been brought in, against our will, to live amongst us.

But it is of no use arguing about what might have been. The hard fact is that to-day only about 65 per cent of the population of the Holy Land are Arabs.

There is another important fact: the material backwardness of the Arabs, not only in Palestine, but all over the Middle East. They are too poorly equipped in a material and economic sense to survive permanently in a world economically dominated by powerful industrial nations. Sooner or later the economically weak must accept the inevitable and adapt themselves to the changed conditions brought about

by the strong. Where industry, trade and commerce are concerned, might is ultimately right. The will of the stronger, or sometimes of the majority, must finally prevail. The Arabs will find it impossible to live much longer in Islamic isolation and stagnation in a world benefiting from scientific, economic and medical progress, and advancing towards economic inter-dependence. They must come right into the modern world or continue their slide back into oblivion.

The Arabs can choose three alternatives to feudalism. The first is co-operation with the Jews on a basis of equality. The second is what they regard as exploitation and domination by the Zionists. The third is communism. The economic influence of Jewish Palestine is bound to extend beyond the borders of that country : that is why I speak of the Arab Middle East rather than of Palestine alone. There was once a fourth alternative to feudalism : a form of democracy developed on tribal foundations. But Britain missed this chance by her unhappy tradition of supporting the *status quo* and letting the feudal leaders go on exploiting the peasantry. In Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine the masses, though benefiting a little from British advice and our Mandates, are still, in practice, denied what we regard as basic human rights. Britain succeeded only in bolstering decaying feudalism.

The experience of the last three decades, during which anything from 25 to 50 million European Christians and Jews have died as a direct result of wars of our own making, gives us Westerners no serious right to claim that our civilisation is superior to that of the Arabs. The latter have managed their recent affairs a little better than we Westerners. Intelligent Arabs often make this point when they are urged to co-operate with the Jews and come more into line with Western civilisation. They feel that the advantages of Western civilisation are more than balanced by the periodical relapse into major wars involving millions of unnatural deaths.

But, for all its faults, our Western civilisation is potentially superior to any other. It carries the seeds and has the

makings of a far better one ; it changes, progresses and experiments, whereas Arab civilisation, because of its complete material stagnation and its purely spiritual values, remains utterly still. It has not advanced in hundreds of years. It is, in plain English, stewing in its own juice.

Spiritual values alone never produced a civilisation vigorous enough to survive permanently in a competitive world in which tribes, groups, peoples and nations have had to struggle to exist. Peoples who have depended on spiritual values have gone under. To survive, a race must be creatively active, its male population must be physically occupied and have a permanent interest in material things and values. Otherwise it must go the way of all oriental civilisations : to material decadence, with its ensuing poverty, ill-health and ultimate oblivion. The Arabs are merely following their predecessors. Only one thing can save them : a material revival, a change from a spiritual to a more material existence.

The West has developed a vigorous civilisation precisely because it has, in the main and in its preoccupation with material progress, thrown aside religion and spiritual values, and, instead, set up material values and aims. Had the West, like the Arabs, adopted the basic principles of its monotheistic religion, and remained exclusively and unswervingly attached to them, then we too would to-day be on the road to racial extinction. For man survives only by hard work and struggle. Our little ambitions for more material comforts, and our willingness to work to earn them, give our civilisation that stimulus which for centuries the Arabs have been without.

On the other hand, our material way of life has been the underlying cause of all our wars, which we justify by conveniently calling in the spiritual values from the shelf where they lay, dusty but handy. But slowly, by costly experiment, we are making the world a better place to live in. Our material way to human progress seems far less likely to bring about

racial extinction than stewing in one's own spiritual juice, as the Arabs are doing.

If, then, the Arabs are to avoid the fate of the Australian aborigines and the American Indians, they must do like their Semitic cousins the Jews and adopt a more material existence. They must co-operate with the West and with their Jewish neighbours. To continue as they have done for centuries would be suicidal. Given a free hand, the Jews could develop the whole Middle East as it has never been done before. They could exploit existing and potential resources, reafforest vast areas, recreate agriculture and build thriving manufacturing townships. The Middle East is largely fertile, and if widespread rainfall is small, there is enough water in the rivers and below the ground to irrigate enormous areas. What they have already done in Palestine the Jews could do elsewhere. Provided the political antagonisms could be put aside, the Arabs would be the principal beneficiaries. The Jews, on the other hand, would gain but little. In Palestine, for instance, they are merely starting afresh, and they are toiling and sweating merely to build themselves the sort of material existence they have always been accustomed to. The Arabs have everything to gain from Jewish co-operation and pioneer work, whereas the Jews themselves have but little, if anything, to gain.

If the Ibn Sauds, the King Abdullahs, the rival dynasties and families are still largely feudal, there are amongst them a few enlightened minds ready for change and for co-operation with the Jews. And if some real statesmanship is needed on the Arab side, it is required in far greater measure on the Jewish side. It is for the Jews to prove that they have not gone to Palestine to use it as a base for the conquest of an inferior people, but to collaborate with the Arabs in rejuvenating the Middle East.

But where is the Jewish statesmanship ? Zionism is proving to be little better than old-fashioned European domination. The age of conquests is over ; there are even

signs that the age of separate and independent nationhood is ending. A Jewish State in the Middle East can only exist as a part of the whole Middle East economy in complete harmony with its neighbours. The Arabs have proved often enough that they are willing to live side by side with any number of Jews, but not with Zionists. They draw a distinction between the two. Until wise Jewish statesmanship proves the contrary, the Arabs will regard Zionism as an off-shoot of German Nationalism. It is most unfortunate that Zionism has long had a background of Germanic and Central European culture. It is unfortunate that in Europe it has developed and flourished in the dreams of its exponents contemporaneously (though entirely in another direction) with the great period of German expansion, dating from Bismarck right down to Hitler. In such terrible incidents as Deir Yassin, Arabs see the ominous shadow of Teutonic racial theories. And Zionist treatment of Arab labour is but colonial domination of antiquated imperial pattern. These drawbacks of Zionism, and all this terrorism, whether against the British or the Arabs, are, though extremely unfortunate, nothing more than the growing pains of an infant State. It will all pass, but in the meantime no one can blame the Arabs if, in their lack of political experience of Europe, they regard some of the more unpleasant aspects of Zionism as a form of German Nationalism. If the Jewish statesmen of Palestine could practise a little more of the socialism they claim to follow, they would win some of the latent goodwill waiting to be exploited in the Arabs.

Arabs and Zionists are now neighbours. This is a material fact that cannot be changed. The future must be built up on a realistic basis. The Zionists have taken root in the Arab world. The moment has come for the Jews to find the statesmen courageous enough to forget racial superiority, and to realise that the Arabs are ready to treat them far better than some European peoples ever did. The Jews must, if necessary, throw aside those men who are trying to build up a Jewish State on petty Zionist ideals, and

on the unsure foundations of Arab ill-will, mistrust and hatred. Thus far the Zionists seem to have pursued a policy that can only end in its own extinction. Let enlightened Jews realise that some of the right is on the side of the Arabs ; let them realise that the Arabs regard the National Home and the Jewish State as illegal acquisitions which, however, they are ready to accept as neighbours provided their own rights and their own home in Palestine are also recognised.

After having delivered several Arab countries from Turkish rule, Britain seems to have failed politically to make anything of that good work. After some thirty years we withdraw our influence from many parts of the Middle East, and leave it dangerously uncertain of its own future. In Palestine successive British governments have pursued a mandatory policy that seems, on the surface, to have been calculated to turn the Arab world against us. We have created the so-called Arab-Jewish problem, and have failed to fulfil our main promise to the inhabitants of the Holy Land. We have blundered all along.

Yet the Arabs credit us with unlimited political sagacity. They just cannot see that we grope and blunder. If they could, they would take pity on us and forgive us. Instead, they think we are crafty and cunning, that we are gifted with Lawrencian foresight, and that we can outwit the politicians of any country which chooses to rival us. Hence they think we are using the Zionists as the tool of Anglo-American economic exploitation. They just will not believe that the Palestine mess is due to incompetence and lack of vision.

We have now laid down the Mandate and transferred the responsibility for Palestine to U.N. Britain's work in Palestine is ended. Rightly or wrongly — and only history will be able to judge our work — we have transformed an Arab Palestine into an Arab-Jewish country. We have, if we take the most optimistic point of view, led the Middle East to the threshold of a new era, an era of rejuvenation and revival. Arab wisdom, steadfastness and endurance can, with Jewish

skill, brains and energy, create a new age for both these branches of the Semitic race. Wise guidance by U.N. must curb the political extremists of both sides, for the goodwill is there, in both Arabs and Jews, waiting to be used for their joint benefit.

## *CHAPTER XLIII*

### RED LIGHT

MOSLEM-ARAB political leaders are shrewd, clever and determined. They are fighting hard to bring about a revival of Islam and make the Arab world a power in modern politics. To achieve these aims they must have an Arab world freed of all European domination and influence, though not necessarily without foreign alliances. Freed some twenty-five years ago from centuries of Ottoman domination, the Arab Middle East is still in a state of turmoil: it is not yet out of the wood or on the road to full freedom and progress. The task is gigantic, for illiteracy and its attendant evils are a tremendous drag on progress. Illiteracy is at the same time both a liability and an asset. The Moslem masses are unswerving in their loyalty to their feudal leaders and their faith. Education would only break up this unified loyalty and create internal strife and unrest. At the same time this widespread illiteracy and poverty make the Arab world an easy potential victim to ideological conquest from outside — say from Russia, for instance. It happened in Azerbaijan, which is fanatically Moslem. It could happen on a larger scale in Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus. A handful of puppets, acting vigorously, could bring a vast Arab area under Russian influence overnight.

This fear of Russian penetration is second only to the fear of Zionism. It is this fear which has kept leading Moslems more friendly to Britain than they were really justified in being in view of our concessions to the Zionists in the past twenty years. When Russia set up an Autonomous “Democratic” Republic in Azerbaijan leading Metwali Moslems made it clear to me that they regarded the Russian

aggression as the greatest shock and menace to the Moslem world since the days of the Ottoman Empire. It was the first direct aggression against any Moslem country committed by any non-Moslem power. They knew it spelt the beginning of Russian penetration down to the shores of the Mediterranean.

It is apparent to all of us that Russia is doing her utmost to diminish British influence in the Middle East. When we are gone she can more easily step in herself. Leading Moslems accuse the Russians of being behind the Egyptian press campaign that clamoured for the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt. They say that the Russian Minister in Cairo, a Moslem, had won the ear of King Farouk and his courtiers. To many of us who were occupied with Arab affairs during the war Russian interest in the Middle East was clearly evident. There was ample proof of active Russian interest in the Armenian and Kurdish minority problems. Russia has asked, if discreetly, for the use of the Turkish ex-Syrian port of Alexandretta, and for islands in the Dodecanese and Cyclades groups. She has been continuously active amongst the Armenians. In the autumn of 1945, when the war with Japan was scarcely finished, a large party of civilian Russian "tourists" suddenly appeared in Beirut on holiday. I do not pretend to know why they were there. Each must draw his own conclusions.

The Middle East is a main centre of world politics. There, as elsewhere, Russia is discrediting Britain. We withdraw our troops from the Levant and Egypt, only to learn that our Middle East designs are more imperialistic than ever. Because we refuse at various conferences to bow to the Russian will, because we oppose the new Russian Imperialism and ideological expansion, we are a menace to the peace of the world. The backward and ignorant masses of Albania (Moslems), Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Roumania, who are always fighting amongst themselves are, because they are now under the Russian heel, more peace-loving than us war-mongering Britons. The valiant Greeks, as backward as

the rest, are asked to cede territory to an ex-enemy state, Bulgaria, whose war and peace efforts have been confined to boot-licking, first to the Germans and now to the Russians. It is in this topsy-turvy Balkan and Middle East area that Britain is being discredited by an ally whose salvation (according to all Moslems) is due to Britain's part in 1939-41, when Russia did not raise a finger to help us. Through Persia and through the Balkans the ideological steam-roller is bearing down on the Middle East.

For five years we occupied most of the Middle East. For five years many Allied officers and soldiers wrongly treated the Arab as an inferior creature. For five years we failed to pursue a vigorous and straightforward policy that might have made the Arabs our firm and lasting friends. Only too often I had to make excuses for the discourteous treatment by certain officers and soldiers towards Arabs. More than once I felt a sense of shame when educated Moslems said to me, in perfect English : "Why is it that your British soldiers always call us wogs ?" I and my colleagues, who had to live amongst these courteous, charming and really civilised people, had our work cut out to mend the wounds caused by the gruff, impatient, condescending treatment by some of the less enlightened of our military personnel. The army is to blame for not sufficiently stressing the value of courtesy and good manners. The Arabs have many faults, but at least they are courteous, polite and know how to conduct themselves towards strangers. If we have lost, or failed to gain, the whole-hearted goodwill of the Arabs, it is partly due to the lack of realism, both in our politicians and our troops. In some ways we are not superior to the Arabs. There is a higher prevalence of dishonesty and crime in our own country than in any Arab country. And if we appear to be cleaner, there is a lot of moral and physical dirt in our commercial practices and our back streets. The Arab is primitive and backward, but surely it is no sin to be a peasant or to be without cars, machines and electric light ?

We can only have ourselves to blame if Russia exploits the uncertain situation in the Middle East. We occupied the Arab world, we neglected and hesitated, and then withdrew. For the first time since the rise of the Ottoman Empire the Middle East has become a disjointed collection of small states, loosely held together by the Arab League. The winding-up of the French and British Mandates, and the withdrawal of Allied troops, have, in modern parlance, left a vacuum. The Arab states are economically and politically too weak to weld themselves into a powerful federation, and so fill the vacuum.

It is a situation that must gladden some of the hearts in Moscow. This situation would not now exist had we, when we controlled Iraq, Egypt, Palestine and Transjordan, taken steps to curb the excesses of feudal rule, and done as much for the Arab masses as we did for the Jews from Europe.

And now, from their vacuum, both Arab feudal leaders and, ironically enough, their impoverished Moslem masses, see the Red Light on the north-eastern horizon.

THE END





